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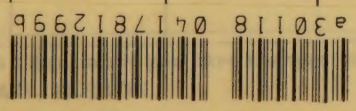

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CRUEL AS THE GRAVE

Sir Herbert Malynson, after a blameless life and distinguished career, dies suddenly of heart failure in his beautiful home in Devon. Nothing could apparently be less sinister than the circumstances of his death; yet within a few days the neighbourhood is alive with the rumour of poison.

Benedict Breeze, a solicitor and amateur criminologist, is called in by the widow to investigate this campaign of scandal. By means of fast-moving dialogue the real character of the dead man is revealed; he is seen in turn through the eyes of the four women who loved him—his wife, his sister, his secretary and his mistress—and more dispassionately through the ironical scrutiny of Simon Malynson, the only male relation with whom he was intimate. Events move rapidly and Benedict is hurried on to the final psychological twist which exposes the true nature and motive of the crime.

By the same Author

DEATH ENTERS THE WARD

DEATH AND BENEDICT

CRUEL AS THE GRAVE

ISABELLA BAYNE

JARROLDS *Publishers* (LONDON) *Ltd*
FOUNDED IN 1770

Jarrolds Publishers (London) Limited
178-202 Great Portland Street, London, W.1

London Melbourne Sydney Auckland
Bombay Johannesburg New York Toronto

First published 1956

0216

Printed in Great Britain
by The Anchor Press, Ltd.,
Tiptree, Essex

CHAPTER I

BENEDICT BREEZE was late for work. This was no new thing. He often found fascinating distractions to delay him on his way to the office. Routine work bored him; he did it efficiently but without zeal; real life lay outside the solicitor's office. The clock in New Oxford Street pointed to half past ten. He was seldom as outrageously late as this. He had, however, an excellent excuse. He had only returned the night before from the South of France, where he had gone on some official business and where in a bewilderingly few days he had settled a little matter of kidnapping and murder. He was feeling tired after the journey, depressed at parting with Clarissa, who remained in her aunt's house in Provence and whose last word had been "Remember!" This injunction, unlike that of Charles I, held no ambiguity. Benedict understood it perfectly. He was not to indulge in his passion for criminology. Not that he was likely to have any further opportunity. Piles of papers would soon extinguish all active interest in life.

He walked on slowly through the wide streets of Bloomsbury. After the bitter cold of the South of France, London in January seemed muggy and enervating. Neither climate nor desire inclined him to hurry. As he went he opened *The Times*, which he had picked up quickly from a stack of things that had collected during his absence on the small table in his bed-sitting-room. As he unfolded the paper, inhaling with pleasure the peculiar moist sweet smell which emanated from its respectable pages, he noticed that it bore the date of two days ago. He had picked up a back copy by mistake. It didn't matter. News would always keep. As usual he turned his attention to the personal column. It often gave him cause for

mild speculation, but he was not prepared for the startling force of the top entry which met his eye:

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." In memory H.Z.M. December 15th, 1949.

His tired brain stirred into activity. He quickened his step, not with any desire to get to the office sooner but to keep pace with the exciting thoughts which such an announcement provoked. December 15th, 1949. That was exactly a month ago. What in fact did this entry commemorate? Someone's death in dubious circumstances? Or was it the furious cry of a man tricked over a business deal? Or the outburst of a fanatic? Or a code? Or simply the work of a practical joker? One could think what one liked but one would always be wrong. Truth was so much stranger than fiction. The wildest flights of the imagination over-reached and at the same time fell short of reality. H.Z.M. They were a person's initials presumably and rather unusual ones. Benedict frowned, trying to recall a vague impression. He had seen those initials somewhere quite recently but he couldn't remember in what connection. And now he would never know. How tormenting it was! Frustrated in love and curiosity, two of the most powerful of human emotions, he was indeed, he felt, an object of pity.

He reached the office which was on the first floor of a Georgian house in one of those large squares of Bloomsbury distinguished now by an air of spacious desertion. He passed up a stone staircase lit by a long window whose sill was piled with papers, into an outer office also stacked from floor to ceiling with bundles of papers done up with faded red tape, and occasional deed-boxes. There was no system of filing; it was unnecessary, as Mr. Hodge Danvers knew as if by instinct where every paper lay. He sat now as usual at his desk, apparently engaged in nothing more arduous than

looking through the glass door opposite into an inner office where the 'young ladies', as he termed the two elderly clerks, worked. He made a slight gesture of rising as Benedict came in, but neither of them were taken in by it. Too arthritic to move easily, he remained at the table, directing the work of others.

He and Benedict exchanged brief greetings.

"You will be glad to be back, sir," Mr. Danvers said, who regarded all foreign parts as the natural domain of the devil. "A lady called to see you. I explained that you were—er—delayed."

"A lady?" Benedict said with little interest. "What did she want?"

"I couldn't say, sir. She would leave no name or message. Recently widowed I should say. She was in deep mourning. Rather a refreshing sight these days."

"What a charming expression!" Benedict said as he moved to the door of his own office, which lay beyond Mr. Danvers's desk.

"She will be back by eleven-thirty, sir," Mr. Danvers added.

"Well, if she's recently bereaved it will be Mr. Grant she will want to see."

The bereaved always wanted to see Mr. Grant; kind, chivalrous, sociable and shrewd, he was the personal friend of nearly all his clients and his presence in time of death seemed as natural as that of doctor or priest and was a great deal more welcome than that of many relations.

"He will not be in today," Mr. Danvers said. "He is at Sir Joshua Hillingdon's funeral."

"All right then. I'll see her," Benedict said.

He settled down at his desk and pretended to give his mind to business which had accumulated during his absence. Mr. Grant had as great a distaste for routine business as he had a liking for funerals, and as these were increasing in

number owing to the mounting age of his clients he had an excellent excuse for giving little time to the office. In fact there was now so much work waiting to be done that Benedict could see no point in attempting to start on it. Instead he played with his paper-weights; he had quite a collection of Victorian ones and others, a few specimens of which he kept out on his desk. The Albert Memorial enveloped in a snowstorm was his favourite and far surpassed in solid workmanship the more frivolous affair of St. Peter's at Rome in the same plight. He tilted back his chair and with his hand at arm's length in front of him he gave a flick of his wrist and the cupola of St. Peter's was smothered by thick white flakes more substantial than the building itself. And then at the angle at which he was tilted something else caught his eye. He gave a whistle, a sharp intake of breath through his teeth, very painful to the ear, and nearly toppled over backwards in his chair.

On the opposite wall shelves ran from floor to ceiling; the lower ones carried a dusty and unopened load of law books in black cloth bindings, and the upper ones were closely packed with papers and deed-boxes. One deed-box which almost scraped the ceiling had now occupied his attention; on the black enamel surface the white letters stood out clearly. H.Z.M. A coincidence? Perhaps. But he was already at the door.

"Mr. Danvers," he said, for no one addressed the head clerk without the prefix of Mr., "whose brief-box is that with the initials H.Z.M.?"

Mr. Danvers, as usual, provided an almost instant answer.

"Herbert Zachary Malynson, an old client of ours. He died a short time ago."

"Did we do any work for him?"

"Not recently, sir. He lived in the country. I believe he employed a local firm of solicitors—quite good in their way,

no doubt, for smaller things. He used to consult Mr. Grant on any major issue."

"When did he die?"

"I think it must have been about a month ago. I know there was a piece in the papers about him. Why now, that's very curious, but I believe that the lady who called just now must have been his widow."

"What!" Benedict, who had turned back to his room, spun round. "She's Mrs. Malynson, you say."

"Lady Malynson. He was Sir Herbert Malynson, knighted, I rather fancy, for his services in India in connection with one of those famines they always seem to have out there."

"Do you know her then?"

"Not to say know. I believe I had the pleasure of seeing her once when she came here many years ago now. I wonder I didn't recognize her at once. But she was wearing deep mourning, and then age makes such a difference to the appearance of ladies."

"Indeed, yes," Benedict said. "I will see her at once when she comes."

He returned to his work with renewed zest, and with the help of Miss Pilkington he despatched two or three small affairs which had been awaiting attention for several months. "Good old Grant, he always does things in the end," Benedict could hear the clients saying as they received their mail. Oddly enough their comments were never more severe than this; they preferred to wait on Mr. Grant's convenience rather than go to a solicitor with more efficient and less personal methods.

Benedict was, however, not so absorbed in his work as to remain unaware of Lady Malynson's arrival in the outer office. He could hear her speaking in a rather full, one might say rich, voice, and Mr. Danvers replying in short dry tones. He dismissed Miss Pilkington, who disappeared through a

second door into her own domain. The voices came nearer. The door opened. For once Mr. Danvers had contrived to get up.

"Lady Malynson, sir," he said.

Over Mr. Danvers's large, stooping body Benedict could see the figure of a tall woman in black. There was no doubt about the depth of the mourning, he realized, as she advanced into the room. Hat, clothes, shoes and gloves all of black and she was carrying a black suède handbag, and a black neatly furled umbrella with a frill like a lettuce growing round a jet handle. The only relief was a hint of white at the neck where the blouse showed above the high buttoned jacket of the coat and skirt. Benedict had to admit that mourning suited her remarkably well; there was nothing hasty or ill-considered in her choice of clothes; she had taken care to do justice to her husband's memory. She was of early middle age and still very good looking. Her skin of thick creamy texture was hardly lined; the face which wore a becoming pallor had lost a little of its natural fullness as if grief had pinched the flesh and accentuated the shapely cheek-bones. She stood for a moment looking at Benedict out of huge, deep-set eyes of brilliant blue, which seemed to reflect as many passing shades as the sea. Then her lips parted in what must have been once a dazzling smile, but which now, with constant repetition, had lost a little of its spontaneity.

"Mr. Breeze? How kind of you to see me," she said, investing the formal words with a certain deep significance.

"I am delighted to be of service to you," Benedict said, falling at once into a slightly extravagant way of talking which the occasion seemed to demand. "I am indeed sorry that Mr. Grant is not in today."

"Oh, that I quite understand," she said, moving a little nearer him. He became aware of the scent she was using. It was stronger and sweeter than he would have expected. What was it now? Yes, of course. Juliette *Rêve de Nuit*. "He must have so many claims on his time."

"Yes, indeed," Benedict said, rapidly calculating the number of funerals that Mr. Grant had attended during the last twelve months. "Won't you sit down?"

She sat down with a certain measured grace on an upright chair by the desk. She pulled off her gloves and showed very white, well-shaped hands, a little plump at the fingers now, so that the wedding ring, the sole ornament that she wore, dinted into the flesh.

"I have only had occasion to meet him once," she said. "He was so kind, so very kind. Kindness and integrity—what rare virtues!" She gave Benedict a quick intimate smile as if to show that kindness and integrity were two qualities which they both loved and possessed. "One only learns that by bitter experience. My attitude to the world used to be one of trust, but since my husband's death all that has changed."

Benedict made a sympathetic murmur at the back of his throat. Mr. Grant, he knew, would have done better than that; he would have been ready with the fitting word of sympathy; but Lady Malynson hardly seemed to need any encouragement to talk.

For a moment she was silent, then with a slight movement of her head as if dismissing sad memories, she said in the tones of one who understands efficiency: "And now I mustn't take up any more of your time unnecessarily. I will come at once to the point of my visit. I have come to ask your advice about something, small in itself perhaps, which has caused me a great deal of distress."

As she spoke she fumbled in her handbag; Benedict had no need to feign interest; he waited impatiently until she produced a folded sheet of newspaper.

"*The Times* of two days ago," he observed.

She looked at him, startled.

"Then you have seen it?"

"The announcement in the personal column—yes."

"Oh!" Her upraised hand, holding the paper, dropped to

her lap. "Then everyone must have seen it—everyone must know."

"Know what?" Benedict said.

"About my husband."

"Forgive me, but are you quite sure that this announcement does refer to your husband?"

"It is obvious, I am afraid. He died, you see, on December 15th, 1949. And then the initials—an unusual combination."

"Yes, I see. But it is possible, I suppose, that it may refer to something totally different."

"But what an extraordinary coincidence!"

"In my experience life is full of coincidences so extraordinary that no fiction-writer would dare to make use of them."

"I knew as soon as I had opened the paper," she went on as if she had not heard Benedict's last remark. "I am only a woman, spoilt, too, by depending all these years on the sound judgment of my husband. I knew I couldn't fight this business alone. I desperately needed help. So I came up to London to see Mr. Grant. We dealt for smaller things with a local firm of solicitors, Messrs. Ford, Trapp, and Ford. But for bigger things my husband always came to Mr. Grant for advice. He had such a respect for his judgment. Tell me, Mr. Breeze, surely there must be some way of stopping this —some legal protection against these public insinuations."

As she spoke, she clutched the offending sheet of newspaper in both hands, screwing it into a ball. Benedict looked at her curiously. Why, he wondered, had she known at once that the announcement referred to her husband? Aloud he said: "That is a little difficult to say. You must allow me to ask you one or two questions first of all. To begin with, did your husband, to your knowledge, have any enemies?"

She looked at him with smiling incredulity.

"Of course, you never knew him," she said. "He was not only without enemies but quite incapable of making any. He

was a man of warm and generous nature who, in his public as well as his private life, was loved by everyone who knew him. A very rare thing in these days of selfish scramble for money and position."

"Very rare indeed," Benedict agreed. "Then you have no idea who inserted this announcement?"

"None at all. I cannot imagine anyone doing such a thing."

"And to what exactly do you suppose it refers?"

"To my husband's death."

"Quite so. But why? I mean why such a choice of text? It isn't exactly what a friend, for example, would have chosen."

"That's what's so devilish about it. No open accusation, only dark hints—all part, you see, of this campaign of lies."

"What campaign of lies?" Benedict said, rather with the feeling of being at a film and back at the point where he had first come in.

"It's so difficult to explain. It's all so intangible. No one speaks to me openly about it. It all goes on behind my back—even the school children point at me and whisper together as I pass them in the lanes."

"And how long have you been aware of this?"

"Since my husband's death, I suppose. I don't really know. I was at first too prostrate with grief to notice anything. We had no children, you see, and Herbert was all I had in the world. To be suddenly bereft of your husband and close companion for the best part of thirty years—it's like being torn up by the roots, so painful as to be quite numbing. I had no desire to live, but mercifully I was borne up by one great resolution—to finish my husband's work."

"His work?"

"Yes, he was a scholar, you know, as well as a brilliant administrator. But it was scholarship which really counted. It was for that reason that he left the I.C.S. before he had

reached the zenith of his achievement. His name was already a household word in India. You have perhaps heard of the Bidnohr disaster?"

"An earthquake?"

"An earthquake followed by famine. Herbert was acting governor of the province. It was his prompt action, his tireless self-sacrifice, which saved the situation. It was a terrible time but yet very rewarding. It was an inspiration to be at his side, to fight the famine with him and to help with the splendid women's relief work. Hundreds and thousands of people were saved from starvation and settled on the land again. He was knighted for his services. The most promising future lay ahead of him. But he decided to give it all up in order to devote himself to scholarship. For years he had wanted to undertake a great piece of research work and now he decided that the time had come to retire to his old family home in the country and write his book on monasticism."

"Monasticism!" Benedict said, surprised. "An exceedingly interesting subject, of course."

"I am glad you think so. Unfortunately to many people today the ideals which inspired the monastic way of life are quite incomprehensible. But Herbert and I had always been greatly interested in religion, and of course out in India the atmosphere is favourable to it."

"And you helped him?"

"As far as I was able. He said indeed that I was his inspiration and that without me he could never have achieved it. Of course he exaggerated. But at least I was able to help with some of the research. There was a mountain of reading to be done and often not easily accessible documents. It was almost finished when he died and I am now doing the last corrections. What I should have done without it I can't imagine. 'Let the dead bury the dead.' Have you ever thought what wisdom is contained in that text? A warning not to sink into that selfish grief which first overwhelms one, but to

struggle forward to the life which still waits to be lived if one has the courage to find it."

There was a moment's silence. Benedict felt that they were circling round the problem and never getting to its centre. He decided on blunter tactics.

"Exactly what do you suspect then?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said vehemently. "Nothing at all. It is what others suspect. Even in my own household the furtive whispers go on. At first I dismissed it all as idle gossip until I received an anonymous letter."

"An anonymous letter?"

"Yes, about ten days after my husband's death. Just pushed in under the door—an uneducated scrawl on a dirty piece of paper."

"Do you remember what it said exactly?"

"The words are branded on my mind. 'You caused his death. Remember Judgment Day.' "

"That was all?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with the letter?"

"I did what one should always do with such detestable things. I threw it straight into the fire."

"A pity."

"You mean it might have afforded some clue? I think not. Just the work of some crazed person, eaten with envy and suspicion. I didn't know they existed in our part of the world. We are such a happy little community in Izard St. Petroch."

"But even the best of small communities are not entirely idyllic," Benedict said. "Not entirely devoid of spite and malice I should have thought."

"That is what the vicar said."

"The vicar?"

"Yes, a kind, well-meaning man. He happened to call just after I had received the letter. He saw I was very upset and asked me what had happened. I told him about it. He

advised me to take no notice of it, and said that gossip and lying tongues existed even in Izard St. Petroch and that it would soon all die down again. At that of course I asked him what he meant. What gossip? What lying tongues? And he looked very confused and said evasively that sudden death often caused talk and then left without saying anything more."

"And is there anything in the circumstances of your husband's death to cause gossip?"

"Nothing—except, I suppose, it's dreadful suddenness."

"He was not ill for long then?"

"Oh no; that is to say, his heart was a little overstrained. Dr. Waller, our local G.P.—such a charming old man and a very dear friend of us both—had been treating him for that, and he had an appointment to see some famous cardiologist in London, but he died before that. I wish now—but what is the use of going all over that again? Unfortunately I had to go away for a night or two just before his death. We were hardly ever separated, you know. But sometimes I used to pay visits of mercy to a failing old aunt of mine right up in Aberdeen, of all inaccessible places. This time she had fatally burnt herself with curling-tongs, poor old thing—you may have read about it in the papers. And of course I had to go off to her at a moment's notice. But I had some sort of premonition about Herbert. I was worried, I suppose, about his heart condition. And instead of staying for the funeral I came straight home, and arrived very late two nights before he died. He seemed quite fit. And I remember thinking I needn't have worried after all. And on the day of his death he was as active and cheerful as ever. He worked on his book during the morning, and in the afternoon he walked down to the village for some meeting—nothing, you know, was ever complete without him. And in the evening we had dinner together—just the two of us. He simply collapsed after dinner and died about two hours later."

"Did he complain of pain?"

"No, not at all, though later he was troubled by thirst. He just suddenly looked desperately ill, was breathless, retching, and gradualy sank into unconsciousness. I sent at once for Dr. Waller, but unfortunately it was his day off, and his young partner, who didn't understand my husband's case, was on call for him. Eventually I managed to contact Dr. Waller at a bridge party and he came at once, but Herbert was very weak by then. Dr. Waller did everything that was possible for him, but medical science seems to know very little about the heart. Herbert died about half an hour later."

Tears trembled in her eyes and she looked down quickly at her hands lying locked together on her lap.

"That is admirably clear," Benedict said to cover her emotion. "I understand what a terrible shock it has been to you, but I can see nothing in what you have just told me to give rise to any scandal, except, of course, that people will talk."

"Oh, how well you understand," she said. Her hands drew apart and the front page of *The Times*, a twisted ball of paper, fell on the floor. "I will confess now," she went on, "that when I first heard that Mr. Grant was not in this morning I almost decided not to consult you, but to wait until his return. But now I am so glad that I didn't do that. I feel I can trust you absolutely. I knew it as soon as I came into the room. Your aura is a very sympathetic one if I may say so. Oh, don't smile. Auras are quite serious things, you know. Not just a matter of circles of light as some people seem to think, but the irradiation of your personality on the ether. I was aware of it at once. I'm so sensitive to that sort of thing, you know."

"No, I'm afraid I don't know. But then, I'm shockingly insensitive."

"Oh, that I don't believe! In fact, because I know it is quite untrue I am bold enough to ask you a very great

favour." She paused and gave him an appealing look out of her huge blue eyes. "Will you do something for me?"

"If I can," Benedict said cautiously.

"You see, when I read this entry in *The Times* I knew I simply had to take action. But I had no idea what to do. I'm so bad at business things. All these years I have been dependent on my husband. I was only a girl when I married him out in China. My father was a merchant out there. He made a fortune and was greatly respected. He always boasted with truth that he had never done anything in commerce to disgrace the royal blood of the Scottish kings which flowed in his veins. And he shielded and spoilt me in every way. In short, you see, I've never had to cope with life for myself, and I don't know how to set about things. But with your help I feel sure I can do something to put a stop to this campaign of scandal."

"How can I help you?"

"By coming down to Izard St. Petroch and finding out what is at the back of all this. To me they won't speak, but to you, a stranger, it is very likely that they will."

"You mean come and stay at Izard St. Petroch?" Benedict said. He had not been quite prepared for this.

"As my guest of course. Oh, I know it's a lot to ask. You have so many things to do, so many other claims on your time. But it would only be for a few days. Naturally it is a business arrangement. You will let me know your fees afterwards. But I can assure you that if you do come I shall not look on it simply as a business arrangement, but as a proof of true friendship."

"Then of course I will come."

"How good of you! Then when may I expect you?"

Benedict glanced at the work piled on the desk. He had a great distaste for it. It was Friday today. A long week-end at Izard St. Petroch might not be a bad thing. It might even stimulate his curiosity.

"Would this week-end suit you?"

"Indeed, yes. The sooner the better. I am returning by the afternoon train. Is that too early for you?"

"I have some things I must finish here. Could I come this evening?"

"Certainly. It will have to be the five-thirty from Paddington. I will order a taxi to meet you at Barnstaple station. Then that is really settled?"

For a moment Benedict thought of Mr. Grant, but surely that natural protector of widows and orphans would not object to such a chivalrous enterprise?

"Yes, it is settled," he said, rising. "The five-thirty this evening."

"Then I will say good-bye for now." She stood close to him and, taking his hand in both hers, said in a low voice: "I am a woman of few words. I find it hard to express my feelings and I know that you do not wish for gratitude. But you will let me say thank you; from the bottom of my heart, thank you."

A minute later she was gone. The heavy scent lingered in the air. Benedict glanced down at the tight ball of newspaper which lay on the floor. On an impulse he picked it up and smoothed it out on his desk. The entry at the head of the personal column was underlined by red pencil pressed so deeply that it had made holes in the paper. Benedict looked at the sheet thoughtfully and then threw it into the waste-paper basket.

He went into the outer office.

"What is your opinion of auras, Mr. Danvers?" he asked.

"Fanciful things," Mr. Danvers replied, not at all at a loss. "I rely on common sense myself."

"And what does your common sense tell you about Lady Malynson?"

Mr. Danvers appeared to consider for a moment.

"A charming lady, of course," he said. "And a deep one too."

CHAPTER II

THE train was late. It was half past eleven when Benedict got out at Barnstaple station. The taxi was waiting in the yard; and he was soon driving along a main road which seemed one continuous switchback. Then the car turned off through a maze of narrow lanes whose high banks seemed always to be rushing in to bar their progress. It was a cold, starlit night, and through occasional gaps in the hedges Benedict caught sight of wild plunging fields and a shimmering line on the horizon where the rising moon touched the sea. Now they were descending an almost vertical hill, rushing on into darkness; then the light of the headlamps was thrown back by the walls of the low, whitewashed cottages.

"Izard St. Petroch," the driver said.

They passed through the narrow street which broadened at the far end into a village green with almshouses on one side and two or three large houses on the other. At the far end stood the church, its square tower rising gravely from among yews and ilexes. As the car flashed by the low stone wall of the churchyard which bordered the road, Benedict caught sight of one or two points of light and some dark figures moving among the tombstones. What could people be doing there? Surely no one could be digging a grave at this hour of night? Then the car, leaving the churchyard behind, began to climb a steep hill. Near the top the driver turned right-handed, then he braked violently. From a dark tunnel of trees someone came running out on to the road almost under the wheels of the car. In the light of the headlamps Benedict caught sight for an instant of a young woman, a pale startled face, hair straggling from under a green scarf tied over the head; then she sprang away into the

hedge like a hunted animal, but with none of its wild grace.

"Some people just ask to be killed," the driver muttered,

He finished the right-hand turn and they passed between two humps of lodges into a lime avenue which ran through rising parkland. It only wanted deer, Benedict reflected, susceptible always to the romance, some said snobbery, of the old tradition. And there close to the railings, transfixed by the headlights, a deer stood as if arrested in motion; for a moment he saw its pale form flattened like the dark trees into some pasteboard theatrical scene, then it sprang away and was lost in the shadow.

The car drew up at the front door. Benedict got out. A plain façade of eight windows wide looked down at him. Then the front door was thrown open and light flooded on to the gravel sweep. Lady Malynson came out with outstretched hands. He met her on the steps of the portico. For a moment she held his hand in her two soft ones. They seemed to convey to him some strong current of emotion.

"My friend, what a terrible journey you must have had," she said.

"Oh, it's been lovely," he said, borne up by the deer. "The drive especially."

She dropped his hands. Then she took a deep breath.

"Yes, how delicious the night air smells. And this countryside is so beautiful. I am glad you like it." She spoke a little as if she were its author and that any appreciation of its beauty was a compliment to herself. "Come in. You must be famished."

In a few minutes Benedict found himself in a large armchair drawn close to the fire. At a low table by his side was a plate of chicken sandwiches and a decanter of liqueur brandy. Lady Malynson at least understood how to make a man comfortable, he reflected.

"I do hope you like brandy. The queen of drinks my husband always said. So clean, so excellent for fatigue."

She moved, as she spoke, into the arc of light thrown by the blue and white Chinese bowl shaped into a lamp which stood on a low table at the other side of the fireplace. Benedict, as he murmured his heartfelt approval of the brandy, was struck by her appearance. Her face, always inclined to pallor, was now as blanched as a stick of well-frosted celery; the only sign of colour was a slight redness round the eyes as if from recent tears.

"Tell me, has anything happened?" he asked.

She paused, with a silver cigarette box open in her hands.

"You are an acute observer, Mr. Breeze," she said. "I hoped I did not show my feelings. But I feel so intensely that control is sometimes beyond me. I betray myself involuntarily. It was a great shock, of course—but how absurd of me to mind so much. As if it could hurt him."

"But what is it?" Benedict said.

She put the cigarette box on the table beside him.

"Eat first, and then I will tell you," she replied.

She sat down on the stool by the fire. She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. It was a sodden little ball which she clutched in the palm of her hand. It still gave off a stale smell of scent. Benedict began eating the sandwiches while she stared with a withdrawn air of grief into the fire. It was brutal in the circumstances perhaps to relish them so much, but he was hungry. As for the brandy—certainly Sir Herbert had enjoyed a discriminating palate. Benedict was visited by beautiful sensations and exalted thoughts. He looked round the room. The far margins were in shadow, but he dimly took in the shining mahogany furniture, shelves of blue and white china, delicate Dresden figures, chintz chair covers and striped brocade hangings and curtains. Regency, exquisite, perfect taste he murmured to himself as the effects

of the brandy mounted to his head. But why, he wondered suddenly, wasn't he sitting back in his chair, instead of perching uncomfortably on its edge? Because he thought with a flash of insight the room wasn't meant to be lived in. It was a little too polished, too exquisite and contrived in its arrangement; it gave one a feeling of both restraint and restlessness.

"Do you use this room much?" he asked.

"It is my sitting-room. What my husband used to jokingly call my boudoir, or my *conservatoire*. There's a little conservatory—you can't see in this light—leading out of the far end of the room into the garden. I'm rather fond of this room I must say. So was Herbert. Of an evening he would come and sit here—in the chair you are in now."

Benedict shifted in his seat, feeling guilty of usurpation. Had Sir Herbert liked this chair? he wondered. Certainly he hadn't marked it with any imprint of his body. It was as smooth, shining and well padded as a chair in the display window of some glossy furniture shop. It was curious how nebulous Sir Herbert seemed to have been. A creature of noble abstractions but without the reality of flesh and blood. Or was it possible that he had never existed except in his wife's imagination? Benedict dismissed this extravagant fancy. There was after all that citation in *Who's Who* which ran something like this: "Malynson, Sir Herbert, K.B.E. Cr 1935. I.C.S. retired. Company Director. E.S. of the late Rev. Anthony Malynson, B.A. *m.* 1921 Sonia Lyon, only child of the late Adam Hamish Lyon of Singapore. Educ. Eton, Christchurch Oxford. Enlisted 1918. Commissioned 1918. M.C. with bar; despatches three times . . ." and so on. All testified to a distinguished career but these bare facts gave no idea of the real man. Benedict's eye travelled to the bureau which stood crossways in the opposite corner as if to get light from a nearby window. Two or three photographs in enormous silver frames stood on top of the bureau. He strained his eyes to see them but the light was too dim.

"My husband," Lady Malynson said, as if, without looking up from the fire, she had followed his gaze. She rose, and crossing to the desk, brought the three photographs over to Benedict.

"The three men I used to call them," she said, smiling a little. "The administrator—in court dress about to attend the viceroy's levee, the country squire, the scholar."

Benedict looked at each photograph in turn. The administrator in a tight, grand uniform, looked back at him in a handsome, glazed way—the country squire in tweeds, with a gun under his arm and two spaniels gambolling at his feet, seemed a little jollier but not entirely at his ease, and the scholar sat upright at his desk brooding on a pile of papers in front of him—presumably his great work on monasticism—with that heavy air of immobility which indigestion sometimes gives. Benedict felt as if he were looking at three highly presentable dummies; the real man had escaped the eye of the camera.

"I always think that between them they give such a good picture of him," Lady Malynson said. She put the photographs back on the bureau, and turning, added: "He was that rare thing—the complete man. Soldier, administrator, scholar, country gentleman—even financier you might add, for one or two big companies were glad of his advice as director; he was equally successful in all those ways and he was as happy and true in his private life as he was in fulfilling his public duties."

"I wish I had known him," Benedict said with sincerity. The character of the dead man now intrigued him. He longed to know what lay beneath this dazzling surface of success.

"I wish you had," she replied. "One couldn't know him without loving him. How does that text go? Something like even to him who has it shall be given. I always thought of that in connection with Herbert."

It was the second time that day that Benedict had heard her quote from the Bible. He thought of the entry in the personal column of *The Times*. Aloud he said, "Won't you tell me what has happened?"

"Yes, it will be a great relief to talk," she said. She sat down again on the stool, but this time she turned away from the fire and looked directly at Benedict. "I have tried to hold it back, to tell no one. I could hardly believe it was true. You must forgive me if I seem rather incoherent. I hardly know what I'm saying. It was such a shock to come back this evening to find an inspector from the county constabulary waiting to see me."

"A police inspector?" Benedict said. He set down his glass of brandy. He was alert and clear-headed now.

"Yes, he had been trying to get in touch with me since yesterday evening, but of course I had been in London for the night and had left no address. He was a nice man. What a terrible thing though to be the police, to have to force your way into the privacy of other people's grief and suffering! I suppose they become hardened. But I could see he minded. It was a great relief to him that I took it so calmly. Indeed he complimented me on my self-control. I thought I had plumbed the depths, but this——" She stopped, making a slightly dramatic gesture of the hand.

"What did he have to tell you?" Benedict said.

He was accustomed now to her indirect approach to any event. She moved towards him on the stool. He found himself looking down at the mass of fair hair, turning white at the roots.

"Mr. Breeze, did you pass the churchyard on your way here?"

"Yes. Why?" Then a recollection struck him. "There were lights and one or two people there."

"There would have been," she said. "You see, they are exhuming my husband's body."

She spoke quietly. Benedict stared at her for a moment in silence.

"And did the police inspector give you any reason for this action?" he said at last.

"He said they were acting on information received. That was all."

"And you have no idea what that information would have been or who could have supplied it?"

"How could I know such a thing? It is entirely incomprehensible to me. It's so cruel, so wicked. My husband died of natural causes—heart disease. Of course that isn't the medical name—a long string of Latin. Dr. Waller, in whom we have always had the greatest confidence—such a dear friend, the old type of country practitioner—attended my husband and wrote out the death certificate."

"Yes, I see." Benedict sipped the last of the brandy, then he added: "But the police, you know, don't act lightly, not unless they have some real grounds for suspicion. You must forgive my asking you this, but have you never had the slightest suspicion that Sir Herbert's death might have been due to eating some poisonous substance——"

"Oh, it's only right that you should ask such a question. The inspector took me through all that. But there's nothing in it, not a shred of suspicion, I can assure you. I have gone over and over in my mind that last meal we had together. I used to wonder, you see, if anything he had eaten could have caused him indigestion and so precipitated a heart attack. We had such a simple meal. Just a vegetable soup to start with, and then a little fish—baked halibut in a white sauce, and then a chocolate trifle. My husband had a sweet tooth and preferred sweets to savouries. I can remember him now piling the sugar on the trifle and my saying that he was really gilding the lily, or something like that, and his saying that Mrs. Bancroft never put enough sugar into things."

"And you both ate the same things?"

"Yes, except that I didn't eat any of the trifle. I had decided that I must really cut down on starchy things. At my age, you know, one has to consider one's figure."

For a moment Lady Malynson looked away from Benedict, and glanced down at her still shapely body. There seemed no spare flesh to give cause for alarm.

"Then I imagine you didn't add sugar to anything during the meal?"

"No, no, that is right."

"And when was Sir Herbert taken ill?"

"About twenty minutes afterwards. We were in here then over coffee—at least only I had coffee. Black without sugar. My husband never took it at night."

"And he had nothing else to drink? No medicine or anything?"

"No. He had been taking some pills for his cardiac condition, but he had come to an end of them. It was I who took the medicine. I suffer a little from indigestion and I usually take a dose before meals. As for drink, we both had water. Herbert had been on the water-wagon since the first cardiac symptoms had begun; that is to say, Dr. Waller had advised it. He was anxious to reduce his blood pressure."

"And there was no pain, you say?"

"No, thank God, he was spared that, though I think later thirst and breathlessness caused him great distress."

"And you sent at once for the doctor?"

"Of course, the moment he complained of being ill. I'm not one to treat ill-health lightly and I was naturally alarmed by his sudden collapse. As I think I told you, it was Dr. Waller's day off, and his partner, Dr. Parkin—a very raw young man who didn't understand my husband's case—came in his place. Fortunately in the end I managed to get through to Dr. Waller and he came at once from his bridge party. He was so good. . . . He assured me that nothing could have saved my husband, and that even if he had survived he

would probably have been an invalid for the rest of his life. So for his sake one must be glad—though it's hard to see it always in that light. Oh no, Mr. Breeze, you can rest assured that there is no mystery about my husband's death. One of those cruel strokes of fate cutting off in his prime someone whom the world can ill afford to lose. It's all part of this lying campaign, this wicked scandal that has been accumulating like some giant snowball—that anonymous letter, the entry in the personal column of *The Times*, and now this. What's at the bottom of it all I don't pretend to understand, but it's that, Mr. Breeze, that I mean to find out and for which I want your help."

"I will do anything I can to help you," Benedict said. "But I am supposed to be acting at the moment as your solicitor——"

"Of course I understand that. I don't ask you to do anything which is contrary to legal etiquette—but surely in a situation of this kind, completely deprived of any support—I am an orphan and an only child, you see, and all Herbert's relations are dead too—surely then I have a right to legal advice?"

"Certainly," Benedict said, discarding after this one gesture to orthodoxy any regard for strict legal etiquette. "And now will you allow me to ask you a few more questions? You see, if I am to help I must know the facts."

"Yes, of course you are right. We must plan our campaign, as my husband used to say. I have such a poor head—I'm so utterly at the mercy of my emotions that very likely there is important evidence that I have not thought of. Ask whatever you like and please do not feel constrained by any desire to spare my feelings."

"Thank you." Benedict was silent for a moment, considering his approach, then he said, "You have already told me that Sir Herbert had no enemies?"

"Yes, everyone will tell you that."

"And you? Have you any enemies?"

She smiled at him.

"Do I look the sort of woman to make enemies? No, I am thankful to say that Herbert and I were alike in that. We went out towards life in trust and friendship and met with nothing but goodwill in return."

"And your household?"

"Oh, a very happy one, I think. This house, like our life, was ruled by love. And many unhappy, lonely people—the world today is full of the *deracinées*, you know—found a refuge here."

"And who was in the house at the time of your husband's death?"

"Most pertinent. Just myself and my husband. The Bancrofts, the butler and cook that is. You didn't see him tonight because I had sent him to bed. One can't be too considerate about servants. And they are so devoted. Bancroft has an odd manner for a butler perhaps, but he was in my husband's regiment during the war—the 1914–18 war, that is. Then he fell on difficult times during the great depression, and my husband, who could never refuse an appeal for help, took them on as manservant and cook."

"They are the only servants who live in?"

"Oh yes, one cannot afford more these days and fortunately Herbert and I have always loved the simple life."

"Ah yes," Benedict said, savouring the last drops of the brandy.

"We have daily help, of course. A Mrs. Retter from the village, and at one time I had Mrs. Hawkins, the wife of our dear old gardener, from the lodge for scrubbing and so on, but really in the end it was no good—she's becoming quite gaga, poor old creature, and I had to get rid of her. Very kindly of course. One has to be so careful, especially living in the country, never to hurt people's feelings."

"Of course—then it was just yourselves and the Bancrofts in the house?"

"And Miss Hamshire—Gladys as we always called her. She was quite like a daughter to us—my husband's secretary. You will see her tomorrow I expect. She's here this week-end packing up her things. She's gone to look after her invalid mother."

"She helped Sir Herbert with his work I suppose?"

"Oh, not quite that," Lady Malynson said with an indulgent smile, "though he often let her think she did because he was so divinely kind and he knew she liked to feel she was helping over the *magnum opus*. She did some typing of the manuscript, you know, and then letters and estate work. But really it was more than we could afford and so perhaps it was lucky—though one shouldn't look at it like that—that her mother was taken ill, and she had to leave to look after her. I know that Herbert would never have dismissed her even if he had had to live on bread and water to pay for her salary. He was like that, you see."

"Yes," said Benedict, who was getting a little tired of Sir Herbert's virtues. "So there were five of you in the house. And did you have any visitors that evening?"

"Yes, Herbert's sister, Rose Malynson—she has a cottage down on the cliff there, and she brought her cousin Simon Malynson, who was staying with her."

"A cousin, then, of your husband?"

"Yes, his first cousin." She spoke with a little reluctance.

A few minutes ago, Benedict recalled, she had declared all her husband's relations to be dead, and now here was a sister and a first cousin turning up. It was curious.

"His only near relations then?"

"Yes, except for his old bedridden uncle, Jaspar Malynson. The Malynson family are almost extinct, alas."

"And did they stay long?"

"Oh, no, just for drinks. Simon had a little talk with Herbert in his study."

"About anything in particular?"

"Money, I expect. He was always short of it. Poor Simon. One of those intellectual *manqués*, you know, who has never done anything with his life. One is sorry for them. Always so wretchedly unhappy and at odds with everything because they can't learn the simple fact that the one thing which matters in this world is the warmth of the human heart."

"And when did they leave?"

"A few minutes before dinner—about ten to eight, I suppose."

"And was Miss Hamshire with you, too?"

"She was with Rose and me in this room to begin with. Then she went upstairs to get on with her packing. She was leaving next day, you see, to go and look after her mother. And, poor thing, she was in such low spirits. She had been with us five years and she was quite devoted to us. It had been a hard choice for her. One could not presume to advise, but of course, in the end, she knew that her place was by the side of her sick mother."

"She didn't have supper with you?"

"No, she had a sick headache. She was so strung up at the thought of leaving. She went to bed with a bowl of soup and some toast. She has her own bed-sitting-room which I let her do up exactly as she liked. And if the result wasn't quite to one's taste—well, what did that matter compared with her feeling thoroughly at home? So you see, Mr. Breeze, it was a very quiet unsensational sort of evening. Just one of the many happy evenings that Herbert and I spent together——" She broke off abruptly. She passed her hand over her eyes as if to wipe away tears. "Oh, please forgive me," she went on. "It's just that sometimes I feel I can't bear it—the terrible loneliness."

Benedict made a sympathethic murmur, and after a suitable lapse of time said, "Did Sir Herbert have any financial difficulties or any other worries that you know of?"

"Oh no; like everyone else we had to cut down a bit, but

there was no real financial difficulty. As for other worries, Herbert wasn't of a worrying nature, and if he had had any, he would certainly have told me. We had no secrets from each other."

"You were nearly always together I think you told me."

"Yes, we were quite inseparable—almost a honeymoon couple. Absurd after all these years. But there it was. Herbert never went away without me except for occasional trips to London to collect material for his book and to attend to his business interests."

"And during the war?"

"I was very fortunate. Herbert had a stiff knee caused by the injuries he received in the earthquake, you know, and he could only do the Home Guard."

"I see. One other question. How did he leave his money?"

"Quite simply. Everything unconditionally to me."

"I see," Benedict said again. Everything about this case was so simple, so clear, of such dazzling innocence, yet nowhere could he find a chink of illumination. He glanced round the room as if in search of some random inspiration. Then for a moment his gaze rested on a portrait above the mantelpiece. It was of a man, in breastplate and wig, whose natural liverish appearance was accentuated by the varnish. A sudden thought struck him.

"Was this Sir Herbert's ancestral home, did you say?"

"Yes, his family home and very dear to him," she replied. "That portrait is of Sir Miles Malynson, a cavalier. He was a quiet scholarly man but he did not hesitate to draw his sword for King and Church and to defend this house against the parliamentary troops. I think Herbert was very like him —*un chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*."

"Then it wasn't entailed?" Benedict said.

Instantly Lady Malynson's face acquired a wary, almost hostile expression.

"Oh, no, certainly not. The entail was broken many

years ago when the property was sold to cover death duties, and for a short time it actually passed out of Malynson hands. And then my husband was able to fulfil his great ambition and buy it back again."

"I see. So there was no question of Mr. Simon Malynson inheriting it?"

"None at all. What an extraordinary idea!" she said in sharp tones, as if striking each word with a mallet. "My husband was at least spared that—he knew that I would carry on the tradition which we both loved and knew to be good. And now, Mr. Breeze, I mustn't keep you up any longer. You must be dead tired. I am afraid I have been guilty of selfishness in absorbing you like this. Let me show you your room."

"And I mustn't keep you up either," Benedict said, rising.

"Oh, as for that, it is of no importance. I don't sleep much. I shall be up most of the night working on my husband's book. I have practically finished correcting it now. Will you go to the door? Then I will put out the light. The switch in the hall is on your right."

Benedict walked to the door, but before he had reached it his hostess had turned off the light. He could hear the rustle of her long black taffeta skirt as she moved towards him. Then he found the handle and opened the door. The hall was in darkness. As he was feeling for the light switch, Lady Malynson joined him. He was conscious of her body very close to him, of the fading breath of scent, and then of her hand softly caressing his sleeve.

"I cannot tell you what a comfort it is to me to have you here," she murmured. "You remind me, you know, a little of Herbert. His same sense of chivalry. I feel I can rely on you exactly as I did on him——"

Her words were interrupted by a bell clanging through the house. Benedict's fingers were on the switch. He pulled

it down. The hall was flooded with light from a huge gilt chandelier which hung on chains from the middle of the ceiling.

"Who can that be?" Lady Malynson said. "It's the front door bell."

"Let me go," Benedict said.

"No, no, I'll go. I know how it opens."

She crossed the spacious floor, large enough to dance fifty couples with ease, to glass doors which cut off an outer square of hall. Benedict stayed where he was. He saw her pass into the outer hall and then stand at the front door, fumbling with bolts and bars. The main bar fell with a clang; she opened the door a little way only, and was then almost knocked over by someone pushing forcibly past her. Benedict took a step forward, then checked himself. It was a woman. As she passed into the light of the inner hall he saw that she was wearing an old tweed coat and a thick green scarf fastened over the head. He seemed to recognize that pale distraught face. Surely it was the same woman who had nearly thrown herself under the car?

"My dear child," Lady Malynson said, turning from the door, "I had no idea you were out. Where have you been? Surely not walking through the lanes at this hour of night——?"

"I had to walk." It was a young, high-pitched, desperate voice. "I couldn't stay in. Why didn't you tell me what they were doing? I passed the churchyard—oh, it was horrible!"

"My poor child, I wanted to spare you."

"Spare me! Oh no, never that!" There was a rising note of hysteria in the voice. "How dare you say that! You killed him—you know you killed him——!"

"Gladys, you're distraught. You don't know what you're saying——"

"Why didn't you let the doctor go to him—why did you send him away? He might have saved him—but the police

will know it all now. They will find out the truth—oh, my God, the truth——"

"Gladys, you're beside yourself. Come, let me help you get to bed——"

"Don't touch me, don't touch me!" she cried. She knocked away Lady Malynson's hand and ran blundering to the staircase as if she were so overpowered with emotion that she could hardly see her way.

For a moment Benedict and Lady Malynson stood speechless, listening to the footsteps and the desperate sobbing which broke from her as she mounted the staircase. Then Lady Malynson said in tones of rather strained charity: "Poor girl, she's quite hysterical. She's never learnt to face grief, you know. Forgive me, Mr. Breeze, I must go to her. Would you be so kind as to shut up? Your room is the first on the right of the staircase."

She hurried away in pursuit; a few minutes later as Benedict reached his bedroom he heard from down a long, dark passage which opened off the landing Lady Malynson knocking on a door which remained obstinately shut.

For a house ruled by love, it was a very disturbing one, he reflected as he undressed. It was a long time before he got to sleep. He chased up and down various spirals of thought. What did Gladys Hamshire mean by her accusation? And if it came to that, what was she doing here at all? Had she not left a month ago to go to her mother's sick-bed? And yet here she was for a week-end, packing up her things. Why hadn't she taken them before? And then again why had Sonia Malynson so much disliked his inquiry about the entail? Mr. Danvers's words recurred to him: "A charming lady of course, but a deep one too." Oh heavens, he thought, as he turned in bed, why had he ever let himself in for such an orgy of feminine emotion?

CHAPTER III

BENEDICT woke early after a restless night. He had dreamed of Clarissa but there had been no comfort in that. "Remember" she had kept saying in icy tones and then had turned away. He had tried to run after her, to explain that it was not his fault, that the events had simply seized upon him, but in the frustrating way of nightmares he could neither move nor speak. He was glad to get up. A thin thread of light only fell through a gap in the red damask curtains. He drew them apart and looked out on a mysterious world of light and mist. He could see dim shapes moving through the park; perhaps they were deer. He would go and see.

He passed through the still sleeping house; from a glass dome high above the stairway the hall was touched with pale morning light. He looked down on a glistening chessboard of black and white squares of stone with here and there a Persian rug thrown down; there were dark oak chests, heavily carved chairs, shelves displaying the monotonous gleam of pewter, and on the white walls hung warming-pans and other brass and copperware polished to a point of aggressive brightness. There was no trace of dust or untidiness; no one, he supposed, could ever come into the house with unwiped feet; as on entering a mosque one would be almost constrained to take off one's shoes. He was glad to get outside.

Soon he was walking through the park; his feet made black marks in the stiff frosted grass. Below in the distance he could see a bar of gold where the sun breaking through the low mist struck the invisible sea. He turned to look back at the house rising with dignity above him. Then he stayed,

watching. From a clump of bushes to the right of the house the bent figure of a woman had emerged. He saw her move cautiously over the gravel sweep and disappear under the imposing portico, the only point of ornament which broke the severe façade. An instant later she came out again and once more took refuge among the bushes. Curious behaviour, Benedict thought as he walked on, and a minute or two later he deliberately looked back again. The woman had just appeared from a screen of cypresses and was walking or rather hobbling quickly but unsteadily down the drive. Benedict walked on with rapid strides and, wheeling round, aimed to cut her off. He pushed his way between the wires of a fence which bordered the avenue and a minute or two later met her face to face. She was a small upright old woman in black; her shoes turned over at the outer edges so that she seemed to be walking on the sides of her feet.

"Good morning," Benedict said, with an amiable smile.

She had been absorbed in her own secret mutterings and the greeting startled her. She looked at Benedict out of suspicious red-rimmed eyes.

"A lovely day," he went on. "I'm staying for the week-end up at the Court."

"You'm not the police then," she said. "Dreadful business digging him up like that."

"You mean Sir Herbert?"

"Yes, he was a lovely gentleman. I couldn't abide his missus, though," and she continued hobbling on down the drive.

Benedict went swiftly back to the house. He opened the front door, which drew back with it a dirty lilac-coloured envelope. He picked it up. It was addressed to Lady Malynson, but without any hesitation he opened it.

"There's no peace for the wicked when the grave gives up its secrets," was scrawled in capital letters over half a sheet of cheap writing paper. Well, that was rather neat for

that crazy old woman to have written. What was her name? He remembered now—Mrs. Hawkins, the gardener's wife, who had recently been dismissed from work at the Court. "One has to be so careful especially living in the country never to hurt people's feelings." Lady Malynson's words came back to him. He smiled. Apparently she hadn't been entirely successful in applying this admirable sentiment.

Then he was startled to realize that he was not alone. A manservant had appeared from nowhere and was standing looking at him rather strangely. His gaze rested on the letter in Benedict's hand as if he knew it was not intended for him.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "I have just taken up your shaving water."

The words were polite but they were spoken with a curious harshness of voice which one didn't expect from a well-trained servant. Indeed there was a certain roughness about his whole appearance not well concealed by the formal black clothes he wore. He looked like a navvy in fancy dress. He was thickset with a fresh open countenance and eyes which contradicted this air of frankness. They were narrow, dark eyes, fiery yet secretive in their expression.

"Thank you," Benedict said and put the letter in his pocket.

"It's frosty underfoot this morning," Bancroft added.

"Er, yes," Benedict said, and wiped his feet on the stiff bristles of the doormat before venturing into the purity of the inner hall.

"Is it true about Sir Herbert?" Bancroft said with unexpected directness.

"That they have exhumed his body, you mean? Yes, I believe so."

"So now it will mean the police?"

"That will depend on the result of the post-mortem examination."

"Yes." Bancroft's mouth twitched into a half smile as if he had no doubt about this.

"You knew Sir Herbert well, I expect. You have been here a long time."

"Ten years. And we were in the first war together. He was an officer, of course, but a good man all the same."

"And so his sudden death must have come to you as a great shock."

Bancroft looked at Benedict with a strange light in his eyes.

" 'My soul hath dwelt with him that hateth peace'," he said.

And he walked away with a silent motion which seemed to give point to his cryptic quotations from the Psalms. Benedict looked after him. What a household! he thought. Then he went upstairs to shave.

In the dining-room Lady Malynson presided over an array of silver pots and jugs. Bareheaded and in daylight she looked older than Benedict had first supposed. The hair of course was dyed—tinted perhaps was the kinder word; he remembered looking into the whiteness of the roots last night. Beneath the careful make-up—designed it seemed to enhance rather than conceal her pallor—there was a fine spread of lines round the eyes and deeper ones across the forehead. She looked very handsome, though. She wore a black tweed coat and skirt and a white silk blouse with a high collar forming in front a tie which was held in place with a pearl-headed pin. There seemed no wrinkle in her clothes, no blemish in her appearance; she was as beautifully preserved as the well-appointed room. She and Benedict exchanged polite greetings. The table he noticed was only laid for two.

"How is Miss Hamshire this morning?" he inquired.

"She's staying quietly in her room," Lady Malynson replied as if the question of Miss Hamshire's health was not

one she cared to discuss. "You were up early this morning. There was another anonymous letter I hear."

"Which I took the liberty of opening," Benedict said, producing it from his pocket. "How did you know?"

"Bancroft told me."

"A disturbingly observant man."

"Do you know who left it?"

He told her of his encounter.

"Oh yes, that would be Mrs. Hawkins. It's terrible what the half-crazed mind can conceive." She dropped the letter on the table with only a casual glance at it. "Marmalade? Bitter or sweet?"

"Bitter, thank you. It doesn't account for the entry in *The Times* of course. Hardly up Mrs. Hawkins's street."

"No, of course not," Sonia Malynson spoke in an abstracted way. No longer did anonymous letters and the announcement in *The Times* seem to move her. Benedict, as he sipped the excellent coffee—really, he thought, this would be a very comfortable house to stay in if only one could feel at ease—looked at her thoughtfully. "I think you should keep that letter to give to the police," he said.

"The police? Oh yes, I suppose so," she replied, without interest. She sat, her coffee cup held in both hands, staring down at the liquid with an air of meditation. Then she set down the cup and turned towards Benedict as if impelled to take some sudden course of action. "Mr. Breeze," she said, "I've been thinking over what you said. I have been up half the night working on the book and trying to escape thought. But in the early hours of the morning, you know, one has a way of coming up against the truth. I see now that I have been wrong, that I must accept the fact that in all this petty gossip and malice there may be some real substance—that my husband, the finest and most lovable of men, may in some inexplicable way have met with a violent death. And if that is so, which I still find hard

to believe, then I see there is only one thing to do—fearlessly to expose the truth."

"The truth?" Benedict said, wondering what had caused this sudden change of front. "Do you know it?"

"No, but I mean to find out and I ask you to help me. Or, more exactly, I rely on you entirely. I am, I fear, a weak impractical woman utterly unused to this cruel side of life. By myself I can do nothing, Mr. Breeze, and I can only hope you won't refuse me your help. I ask a great deal, I suppose, but it's because I know you're one of those rare people from whom a great deal may be expected."

She had a disconcerting way as she spoke of coming closer and closer to the person she was addressing, and Benedict, in the act of lifting his coffee-cup to his lips, almost knocked against her nose. He wanted to laugh, but the huge blue eyes were fixed with an imploring, almost savage, gaze only a few inches from his face. He coughed instead. The blue eyes receded. With relief he set down his cup and said, "You are sure that you want to find out the truth?"

"But of course. What do you suppose?" she cried. "Neither Herbert nor I have ever had any guilty secrets to hide."

"All the same the truth can be very painful."

"That I am not afraid to face. Then you will?"

She gave him a brilliant smile. He looked at her very directly.

"In my private capacity only, not acting as your solicitor. You see, I have had experience of this sort of thing before and I always find it essential to act as an independent agent."

She looked uncertain.

"What do you mean by an independent agent?"

"Only that I must examine things impartially, and if by any chance I should unearth some hidden facts, I might think it my duty to report them to the police."

"But of course that is understood. I want to expose the truth, not to hide anything. And I want you to feel perfectly free to wander round the house as you wish and to ask me or anyone else in the household any questions you think necessary. Later I will show you the geography of the house. Alas, it is a very large house for one lonely, childless widow."

"You will go on living here?"

"Of course. It's part of myself and I shall be able to go on running it as Herbert would have wished. I shall cut down of course. The Bancrofts will be leaving at the end of the month. I had to give them notice. I simply couldn't afford to go on with them. And in any case he wants to set up in a temperance bar in Plymouth. Really it will be rather a relief. Devoted of course. But he's developing a sort of religious mania. They have it round here—so close to Cornwall, I suppose. A very narrow nonconformist sect—The Children of Pentecost. I don't know their tenets of course, except they seem to think everything wrong. Such a pity when the world is so beautiful and I am convinced God meant us to enjoy it. I think a good German maid will suit much better. And I shall still be able to go on making this a happy place for people to come to. I do pity people, you know, the homeless, the *deracinées* of the twentieth century—here at the Court they can find some roots, some security at last. I love travel of course—as a girl I wandered half over Europe. An unforgettable experience. All the colour, beauty and variety of life there went to my head like alcohol tasted for the first time. I drank deeply of culture. I studied music and painting. But in the end of course one needs roots—one needs, in fact, a home. And now if you really won't have any more, shall I show you round the house?"

Benedict was far better acquainted with small bed-sitting-rooms in London, cheap lodgings in Paris or a room in some dilapidated and abandoned palazzo in Italy than he

was with English country houses. But such experience as he had acquired had taught him that they were generally cold and uncomfortable with a rather pleasing air of muddle and shabbiness, and that you were likely to find some elegant Queen Anne piece next door to a dilapidated bamboo table or a pedestal supporting a stuffed bird under a glass dome. But the Court was quite different from this; the order, polish and almost aggressive good taste which he had noticed before persisted everywhere; the only thing which was lacking was an air of homeliness; one might as well be walking through show-rooms of some exquisite furniture shop.

"It's all quite exquisite," he said with truth. Inwardly he wondered how much it had all cost, and how the Malynsons could have afforded it.

"Oh, I am so glad you think so," Lady Malynson said. "Herbert left it all to my discretion. And my one desire was to try and match in beauty the interior decoration and furnishing with the structure and fabric of the house. It was a labour of love; and now that he is gone—but there I mustn't think of that. I will leave you now, Mr. Breeze, to poke round for yourself. I must go and see how poor Gladys is. I think I should advise you to leave her alone for the present. She is so easily upset. When you have finished all you want to do, you will find me in my sitting-room."

Benedict, glad to be relieved of his hostess's company, went down to the hall. He had got a rough plan of the house in his mind. The ground floor was two rooms deep. The first room on the left as you came in at the front door was the dining-room; the next door to it gave into Lady Malynson's sitting-room, which had a french window, through a little conservatory and out into the garden. Facing the front door was the study and next to it the cloak-room; then came the library and finally, fronting the house again, the drawing-room, which was seldom used in winter. Between the library and the drawing-room was a baize door which led into the

kitchen quarters. Benedict opened this door now, and walked down a stone-flagged passage to the kitchen, whose air of cosiness had been unspoilt by the hand of Art. He had already been introduced to Mrs. Bancroft, who was a grey-haired woman of gentle and anxious expression.

"I hope you won't mind if I ask you a few questions," he said, running his hand with pleasure along the edge of the smooth scrubbed kitchen table. Then his hand stopped; his eye was caught by headlines in the *Devon Courier* spread out on the floor below to protect the red tiles still gleaming from their morning wash. NOVELTY CARNIVAL DANCE AND WHIST DRIVE AT IZARD ST. PETROCH. His eye travelled on down the more closely printed paragraph; various phrases stood out TREMENDOUS SUCCESS OF LAST NIGHT'S COMBINED WHIST DRIVE AND DANCE SURPASSED EXPECTATION . . . OVER £200 TAKEN.

Mrs. Markham, the wife of the Vicar of Izard St. Petroch, gave away the prizes in place of Lady Malynson, called away earlier in the day to the bedside of her aunt, Miss Amelia Lyon, of Aberdeen. All regretted her absence, the vicar said, and particularly the cause, and everyone would join with him in wishing her aunt a speedy recovery from her terrible injuries.

Benedict glanced up at the head of the paper again. It was dated December 12th.

"Oh yes, I'm sure we must expect questions now," Mrs. Bancroft was saying. "What a shocking thing! Alive one minute, then took the next. A real gentleman he was too." She moved about in a flustered way as she spoke, opening and shutting the hot plates of the Aga stove for no apparent reason. "I'm sure I can't sleep of a night-time for thinking of it."

"And yet I am sure that Sir Herbert's last illness was not due to anything you cooked for him that evening."

"Oh no, I'm sure there's comfort in that." She turned from the stove and faced Benedict but did not look directly at him; her gaze was on her hands, which were nervously making folds in the voluminous white apron she wore; stillness she seemed to find impossible. "Yes, as I said to Mr. Bancroft, if the Lord takes me tonight there's comfort in that. Nothing on my conscience. I'm careful over food. Everything fresh and my own cooking. Such a digestible meal it was too. Just soup and fish—baked halibut just fresh out of the sea that very day in a white sauce with herbs. And then a chocolate trifle—my own baked sponge cake, and whipped-up egg and a little melted chocolate. It was her ladyship's recipe—not quite sweet enough to my way of thinking. There could have been nothing to harm him in that."

"Nothing I am sure. I believe only Sir Herbert ate the trifle?"

"Yes, he had a sweet tooth. Her ladyship too liked it as a rule but she didn't take any that night—she was starting a diet, only I didn't know and I sent in two glasses of it."

"You mean the chocolate trifle was made up into two individual glasses?"

"Yes, sir, that's right. Her ladyship liked it that way. She was always one for elegance."

"And what happened to the other glass of trifle?"

Mrs. Bancroft stopped pleating her apron and looked for the first time directly at Benedict.

"That Percy Hawkins eat it up—no business to neither. It had just come out of the dining-room and he helped himself to it without so much as asking. Just like him."

"Percy Hawkins? Is that the gardener?"

"No, his grandson—and no call to the name of Hawkins neither. His mother was no better—but there, sir, I won't sully my lips by talking of it. I'm never one for gossip. But the old couple brought him up—didn't seem to feel the

shame of it neither. And a lot of good it did them. Doesn't know the meaning of work. Always mooning about on a piano."

"And what was he doing here on the night Sir Herbert died?"

"Oh, same as usual, banging about on that piano up in the old nursery. Seems he's not content with being an electrician —must play in a dance band or something. And Sir Herbert had let him come and practise here of an evening when his work was done. Only this night for once he had some real work to do."

"Work?"

"Yes, the lights in this part of the house suddenly went out just as I was cooking the supper. And I went up to Percy and said, 'For mercy's sake do something about it,' I said, 'I can't see to cook the supper with only a candle.' And he said it was only a fuse and it wouldn't take a second. And would you believe it, sir, he took over an hour, and had all the floor-boards up—up in the corridor there outside Miss Hamshire's room. Anyone might have broken their neck. And then he comes into the kitchen looking as pleased as Punch with what he's done, just as Mr. Bancroft was coming out of the dining-room with the things from the second course."

"He waited at table then?"

"Oh yes, until he'd put the sweet on the table, that's to say. And then he came out to have his own supper, bringing the dirty things from the earlier courses with him, and the unused trifle."

"Which Master Percy polished off?"

"Yes, said I'd said he could. The cheek of it! I soon turned him out. And then Mr. Bancroft and I sat down to our supper in peace—only of course we hardly got any that night."

"What happened exactly?"

"Well, I was just pouring out the tea—we always had a

cup with our supper—and Mr. Bancroft had taken in her ladyship's coffee and there was nothing else to disturb us, when all of a sudden the hall bell began ringing like a mad thing." She pointed to an imposing double row of hand-bells which hung above the door. "And Mr. Bancroft said to me, 'Whatever's that?' And I said, 'I don't know, I'm sure,' I said, 'you'd better go and see quick. It don't sound right to me.' And he got up and the bell went on ringing and I ran out into the hall behind him, see. And there was her ladyship in the hall with her hand on the bell rope looking as pale as death and she said: 'Bancroft, Sir Herbert's been taken ill. I'm going to ring for the doctor. Please go in to him.'

"Well, then of course we both went into her ladyship's sitting-room where he was—I thought I might be some help too, you see. And he was lying back in the chair pale and sweating and retching too."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, just something like 'Don't let her ladyship worry—it's all right.' He was always a very thoughtful gentleman, you see. And then he started gasping for breath. And I said, 'You'd better come straight upstairs to bed, sir.' And Mr. Bancroft and me between us got him up to his room while her ladyship all the time was trying to get through to the doctor, who was out—it was his day off, you see. And Mr. Bancroft got off his shoes and coat and tie and got him into the single bed in his dressing-room—it was easier, you see, to look after him there than in the big double bed in her ladyship's room—while I went down to fill hot-water bottles. There wasn't no more we could do till the doctor came, though he was retching horribly and bringing it all up."

"Dr. Waller was some time in coming?"

"Yes, it was his day off as I said—only of course once he did hear Sir Herbert was took bad, he came at once, seeing

that Sir Herbert was such a particular patient—an old friend you might say."

"And in the meantime Dr. Waller's partner came?"

"Yes, he was on call, you see. Dr. Parkin. A youngish chap. Gone back up North now. Rather a straight way of talking. And of course he didn't really understand Sir Herbert's case and her ladyship was rather in a way—only I don't really know what happened because at that very moment Miss Hamshire came bursting out of her room in her dressing-gown—she'd gone to bed earlier on with a sick headache and wouldn't so much as let me in when I went up with a tray of Bovril and toast. Well, as I said, she came bursting out on to the landing, crying out to know what had happened. And I said: 'Hush,' I said, 'don't make a noise. Sir Herbert's been took bad.' And she made as if to run into his room and I tried to hold her back, but she was like a mad thing, and she pushed past me and rushed into his room and threw herself down on her knees by his bed—she is rather an emotional sort of young lady though you wouldn't think it to look at her—and she caught Sir Herbert's hand and cried, 'Oh, my God, he's dead!' which he wasn't, only very weak. And she was off in hysterics and I had to get her back to bed and almost hold her there, she was in such a way. And when Dr. Waller came he gave her an injection of something to make her sleep. And then of course next day she went off to her mother, who was ill. But what was I saying? About Dr. Parkin. I always thought it a pity that her ladyship didn't have more confidence in him. They say he's a clever doctor. Only his manner's abrupt. Perhaps he might have done something——"

She stopped dead as Bancroft, with his usual cat-like tread, suddenly appeared in the kitchen. He looked at his wife with a disapproving eye.

"How you do talk, Hetty," he said. " 'Even a fool when he holdeth his peace is counted wise.' The fishman's at the door."

Mrs. Bancroft, who received any fresh happening however trivial with a certain agitation, made a cluck-clucking sound, said it wasn't his time, pulled at her apron, excused herself to Benedict, ran out of the kitchen and then back again to fetch a plate. "Forgetting my own head next," she muttered. "Not the first time either," Bancroft retorted—and finally left the kitchen. Benedict regretted the interruption. He would like to have heard more about Dr. Parkin; there seemed to be some mystery about his attendance that evening; Lady Malynson he recollected had mentioned him quickly in passing, and had slid away from the subject with obvious distaste. Would it be any good asking Bancroft? Or would he only be met by a text? A text—yes—why hadn't he thought of that before? And then he realized that Bancroft was at his elbow. His harsh voice grated in his ear.

"Miss Hamshire would like to see you, sir."

"I'll go to her at once," Benedict said. All thought of Dr. Parkin and texts had gone. He had not expected this opportunity.

"Not that way, sir," Bancroft said, as Benedict at the kitchen door turned to make his way back to the hall. "I'll show you."

Bancroft led the way down a stone-flagged passage, and then corkscrewed up a back staircase of plain wood, worn at the tread with feet and scrubbing. At the top of the staircase he paused and looked to right and left. There was something dramatic in the action. Enter first conspirator, Benedict thought. How admirably Bancroft would play such a part. Then the butler walked on down a wide passage; Benedict, following, realized that his visit was to be kept a secret, that Lady Malynson was not to know of it. Finally Bancroft stopped by a door and gave a little secretive tap on the mahogany surface. He seemed to listen for a reply, then he opened the door and stepped back to let Benedict pass in.

The first thing that struck Benedict as he walked into the

room was that at least here Lady Malynson had had no hand in the interior decoration. He recollected what she had said: "She has her own bed-sitting-room which I let her do up exactly as she liked and if the result isn't quite to one's own taste—well, what does that matter compared with her feeling thoroughly at home?" Yes, he could see it wouldn't be to Lady Malynson's taste. The colour scheme throughout was oatmeal and beige; the only relief was in the cretonne cushions stamped with enormous orange and yellow heads of chrysanthemums. For a moment among all the porridge Benedict did not discern Miss Hamshire in protective colouring of pale fawn. Then he heard a light, rather childish voice say: "How do you do. Mr. Breeze, I presume?"

He took a small boneless hand which seemed to crumple at pressure and looked into the face of a woman who appeared at first sight ageless. Her pink smooth skin made her seem almost eighteen and the round protruding eyes were like currants, or perhaps they more closely resembled the boot buttons one used to sew into the face of a rag doll; the mouth was pressed into lines of petty disapproval; the chin was already beginning to lose its outline in folds of flesh beneath; and the neck, yes, it had crashed all right, Benedict thought, looking at the V-opening of her dress and at the cheap double row of pearls at the throat. She must be thirty—perhaps thirty-five. Her movements too were not those of a young girl. But then she had never known youth; instead she had been allowed to preserve a certain imitation of it late into life. Her manner too was a little kittenish. "I do hope you don't mind coming into my room like this," she went on, with a slight giggle. Oh, how daring, she seemed to say. "And all my packing, too. Oh, do excuse the untidiness."

She turned and slammed down the lid of a trunk. A pile of things pulled out of the open drawers of a tallboy lay on the divan bed under the window. On top Benedict noticed a number of photographs including an enormous one of Lady

Malynson, graciously smiling, in satin and ostrich feathers. Then he raised his eyes to the window. It looked over the back of the house. Below was the sloping glass roof of a greenhouse; beyond lawns dropping down to high banks of rhododendrons and a kissing gate; a path led beyond this to the cliffs; he could just see a scoop of blue sea between two crags of red rock.

"Now do sit down," Miss Hamshire was saying. "That chair, I think. Gentlemen always seem to prefer it. Just the right shape for their backs," and she giggled again.

They both sat down in armchairs on either side of the slowly dying log fire. Benedict observed his hostess closely. He would not have taken her for the distraught creature he had seen last night. How completely now her manner of the playful little girl had overlaid more powerful emotions. There was nothing to betray her except a certain tenseness in the way she sat in her chair, in the restless movements of her hands in her lap. He looked away so that his scrutiny should not be too apparent. There was a fine coloured reproduction of some illuminated manuscript over the mantelpiece. He was surprised to see it there.

"How nice that is," he said. "French isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a leaf from a *Bible Moralisée*, executed in the first quarter of the thirteenth century." She spoke in a quiet factual voice, then an instant later she was the little girl again: "Oh dear, how terrible of me—no cigarettes, I'm afraid. I don't smoke and unless I tie six knots in my handkerchief I never remember."

"Oh, thank you—I have cigarettes but I won't smoke now. You really won't?"

"No, isn't it silly? I've never learnt. I tried when I was eighteen and everyone laughed at the way I held the cigarette and it gave me such a sore throat that I never tried it again."

"You have saved a great deal of money then," Benedict

said, and let his gaze dwell on the bookcase built into the wall on the right of the fireplace. A number of light novels—that he had expected, but he was surprised at the range of serious books mostly on mediaeval history and architecture: *Chaucer's England*, *The Stones of Venice*, *The Religious Houses of Medieval England*, *The History of the First Crusade*, *Lenoir Architecture Monastique*, *The Spirit and Origin of Monasticism*, *Spanish Gothic*. Really, he would like an hour or two in the room just to browse among the books. He might even forget the beige and oatmeal and those bright chrysanthemum-patterned cushions; thank goodness he had his back firmly against one now.

"What nice books you've got!" he said.

"Oh, those," she said, as if for some reason she didn't wish to consider them. "Just an odd lot I've picked up at different times. I could never resist books. Quite a little spendthrift in that way."

There was a moment of rather oppressive silence.

Then Benedict said: "What a business for you, packing everything up! Are you really leaving for good?"

He saw her hand clench on the arm of her chair.

"Yes, yes," she said. "Last time—I couldn't take everything. It was so sudden. I'm just here for the week-end. I can't leave Mother now—but my cousin is with her till Monday."

"I hope your mother is better."

"Oh, a little—yes—but she has always had bad health."

There was a note of despair in her voice so that Benedict in a series of flashes could see the pathos of her life. An only child—father died young—an ailing clinging mother—little money, and living where now? Croydon? Holland Park? Earl's Court?

"Do you live in London?" he said.

"Yes, in West Kensington. We have a small flat there—it's part of a house really."

And not self-contained, Benedict thought, voices and the smell of cooking always coming up the stairs; and then the desperate need to keep up the appearance of gentility. Then he turned his mind to the present. He seemed far away from his real problem.

"And how long have you lived here?"

"About five years."

"Then it must have been a great shock to you——"

"Oh, that," she broke in. "I'd rather not talk about it. I'm sure you'll understand. I'm rather sensitive I suppose. My friends always used to laugh at me, you know, at school and later on at work, for caring so much. And talking doesn't help. I mean it can't put things right. And it's best to forget."

What a fallacious hope! Benedict thought, but he let her turn the conversation to her own use.

"You must think it very odd of me asking you into my room like this," she went on. She gave one of her little nervous giggles, but her button eyes were gazing at him with a fixed disconcerting scrutiny. "But the thing is there is something I want to ask you. I do hope you won't mind—but I believe you are a solicitor?"

"Yes."

"Then may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Is it a serious offence to burn a will?"

Benedict was startled.

"You mean deliberately to destroy a will by burning it?"

"Yes."

"That is certainly a serious offence."

"And what would the sentence be?"

"That would depend on the circumstances. I believe the maximum penalty is three years."

"Not more!" There was a note of disappointment in her voice. "And how do you secure a conviction?"

"That is often a difficulty. You see, there may well be no actual evidence to show that a will has been deliberately destroyed."

"But if there's a copy——"

"A copy isn't legally valid and if the original cannot be found after the testator's death it may be presumed that the testator himself destroyed it because it no longer suited his requirements."

"You mean you could burn someone's will and get off scot free?"

"Well, not scot free. One always pays some time."

"Pays?"

"For one's misdeeds—in this world or the next."

She looked at him for a moment in utter consternation.

"Do you really believe that?"

"Yes." Benedict glanced up at the picture; a choir of angels was wafting a saint upwards on a golden cloud on his final ascent to heaven. "Don't you?"

"Oh, religion to me is purely of cultural significance," she said quickly as if pushing the appalling thought from her. "It wasn't a personal case, you know. Just something a friend asked me about—her aunt has just died and there was some difficulty in finding the will. Funny the odd places old ladies find for hiding things." She gave a little tinkling laugh. She was the kittenish young girl again, observing self-consciously the effect she was having on Benedict. "I do hope you didn't mind me bothering you. A busman's holiday I'm afraid. I hope you will enjoy the week-end, though. Do you play golf?"

She put her head a little on one side as she asked this question. She was the interested, attentive hostess now. Poor thing, Benedict thought, that was how she had managed to get through life, always young, grateful, subservient, seeking the approval of others, suppressing her own feelings.

"No, I prefer a fast game—squash or tennis."

"Oh, I love tennis, too. In the country that is. Not some town court. A lovely shady old court and then tea spread out under trees, with cutrounds—a sort of bun spread with cream and jam, you know, a Devon speciality—and raspberries and cream. Quite my favourite fruit—raspberries. Almost nicer than strawberries, don't you think?"

"Delicious," Benedict said, wondering if he would ever get past this inane, social chit-chat. "But actually I prefer strawberries."

"Oh, they are so good. Such a short season, though. But mashed up with cream and sugar they're quite delicious. But then I have a sweet tooth."

"Sir Herbert had a sweet tooth, too, I believe," Benedict said with sudden brutal directness.

There was a moment of anguished silence. Then Gladys Hamshire collected herself and went on in the same bright tones: "Oh, but then men do. They always pretend not to—but it's never one, always two lumps in their tea. Have you noticed that?"

"Miss Hamshire," Benedict said, leaning a little towards her in his chair, "is there any way in which I can help you? I assure you, you can rely on my good faith. I am not now acting as Lady Malynson's solicitor. I am conducting an independent inquiry——"

"Oh, but how kind of you," she broke in, as if determined to resist his advances. "But now I need no help—except to pack, and no one can do that for me."

She half rose as she spoke and Benedict immediately got up.

"Then I mustn't take up any more of your time. You will have a great deal to do. But if there is anything I can do to help you, please let me know. I'm always at your service."

"Oh, thank you, thank you. To sit on my trunks perhaps. So despairing packing, isn't it? Do you know your way? Oh, let me just open the door. It sticks sometimes."

Benedict went out. He stood for a moment outside the door. Her defences had quite beaten him. Then a cat rubbed against his legs. It seemed to want to go into the room. He opened the door a little way. "Excuse me—the cat," he said.

But Gladys Hamshire didn't hear him. She was standing by the divan bed, a huge photograph in her hands. For a moment Benedict glimpsed the ostrich feathers and the smiling features of Lady Malynson; the next instant the ostrich feathers were rent apart as Gladys with a savage gesture tore the photograph first in two and then into smaller and smaller pieces. Quietly, Benedict shut the door.

In a thoughtful mood Benedict went on downstairs to Sir Herbert's study—his sanctum as Lady Malynson had called it when she had shown him into its dull impeccable interior during their tour of the house. Her scent still lingered in the air. It was odd how strong it was. It must have been an hour or more ago since they had been in here and she had invited him to come back later on and examine anything he wanted. There was a Turkey carpet on the floor, a mahogany bookcase with glass-panelled doors full of tomes with bright gilded backs and, one felt instinctively, uncut pages; a huge roll-top desk, a swivel armchair, a filing cabinet and one or two upright chairs. All was in perfect order, and if Lady Malynson hadn't assured him that she had been scrupulous in leaving the room untouched, exactly as it had always been, he would have supposed that it had been rigorously tidied up. How odd that a man could sit in here, let alone work or think!

Benedict moved to the little stone-flagged room which led off the study—"his laboratory", Lady Malynson had explained. This was a much more homely place and had that air both of purpose and muddle which often characterizes something that is loved and used. Was it possible that Sir Herbert had been a little bored by monasticism and had spent much of his time pottering round his laboratory while

he was supposed to be writing? Certainly he seemed to have a wide range of chemicals and not to care at all about the Dangerous Drugs Act. Benedict was particularly interested in a large glass jar containing a quantity of white crystalline powder. The jar was not labelled—about labels as about almost everything else in this laboratory Sir Herbert appeared to have been a little haphazard. Benedict took a little of the powder and with the aid of the equipment which he found at hand he did a simple chemical experiment. This was quite satisfactory in proving the result he had expected, but why, he wondered, as he turned back into the study, had Sir Herbert felt no pain?

Benedict now turned his attention to the desk. On top was a bookslide containing a number of useful reference books; he had noticed them on his earlier visit to the room: Burke's *Landed Gentry*, *Whitaker's Almanack*, *The Complete Farmer*, *The Gardener's Diary*, *Highways and Byways of Devon*, *Practical Beekeeping*, and then at the end a huge leather-bound volume, Pascal's *Pensées*. "He always had that at hand," Lady Malynson had said. "He said that Pascal had preserved his faith in God." Benedict let his gaze rest for a moment on the *Pensées*, then he opened the flap of the desk. The discreet, well-ordered contents disappointed the scrutiny of the curious. The only thing of interest was a slim volume bound in soft vermilion leather—the sort of thing one associated with the journals of great-aunts; it gave off a slightly musty smell as he opened its purple-edged leaves. It proved to be Sir Herbert's diary. Benedict studied it attentively. It contained a brief recital of facts, so dull that Benedict wondered that Sir Herbert had bothered to record them at all. "Rain early. Work on the book. Wych elm in leaf. Parish council, 3 p.m. Evening dinner with the Rawlinsons" was a typical entry.

Painstakingly, Benedict started at the first page which was dated January 1st, 1949, and which was no doubt a

continuation from another book, and worked his way through the year. Sir Herbert had been a man of regular habit. Every day had its entry: he had not even neglected the last day of his life.

December 15th. 18 degrees of frost. Went on with revision of book. British Legion in the village 3 p.m. Rose and Simon to drinks in evening. Long talk with Simon ending in a furious row.

Benedict gave a piercing whistle and set down the book. It was an interesting revelation, and some two hours after writing it Sir Herbert was dead. In fact he could barely have had time to record the entry. Had not Lady Malynson said that Rose and Simon Malynson had left a few minutes before dinner? It was curious certainly. Benedict, still pondering over it, went through the contents of the desk again to make sure he had missed nothing, but everything betrayed a man of orderly habits whose private life was beyond reproach; from the top of the desk, beside Pascal's *Pensées*, the smiling features of Sonia Malynson in a wide silver frame looked down at him. Last of all he considered the blotter. It was a flat, leather one with the blotting-paper slipped into triangular slots at each corner. The blotting-paper was almost new; a few marks only stained its virgin purity. Benedict picked up the blotter and took it to the mirror above the mantelpiece. With difficulty he made out a few letters from a blur of ink.

Ché J t a me de ain, and then below this came what looked like an address: Mrs. H tt La Ro d Po D o .

Benedict copied the letters down in his note-book. Curious that acute accent coming on the first e. Was it possible that Sir Herbert had been writing a letter in French? It appeared to be his writing as far as he could tell from such a fragment. It wasn't probably of any importance and he put the blotter

back in the desk. He stood for a moment with his hands resting on the extended flap. He felt discouraged by Sir Herbert's well-bred reticence. There was nothing to go upon at all, nothing to excite one's curiosity except the entry in the diary. He picked it up and re-read that last entry. How singular that Sir Herbert, after months of brief factual jottings, should have chosen the last day of his life to have written the only personal remark which appeared anywhere in the whole diary. It was indeed so odd that Benedict took a magnifying-glass from his pocket and studied the beautifully formed handwriting more closely. The strokes forming the last entry seemed slightly coarser and less freely running than those of the earlier entries, but this was perhaps due to the fact that Sir Herbert had used a ball pen, instead of a fountain-pen, for this last record. Benedict glanced down at the desk. There on a pen-tray lay a fountain-pen and two pencils, but no ball pen.

Then the door opened and Lady Malynson came into the room.

"I hope I don't disturb you," she said, and then gave a little nod of understanding as Benedict turned towards her with the diary open in his hands. "So you have seen that?"

"Yes, Sir Herbert seems to have brought it right up to date."

"Yes, even to the last day. He often made up his diary before dinner if we weren't going out or anything."

"You have read it of course?"

"Yes, one doesn't like to think——" and she let the words die away in unvoiced suspicion.

"Do you know what the row was about?"

"No, Herbert didn't say—he was always so tender about sparing the feelings of others, and so loyal to his family. But it was about money I presume. Simon was always in financial difficulties and even Herbert, the soul of generosity, was getting tired of his importunities."

"Has he no profession?"

"Simon? The profession of letters I suppose he would say. He helps to run *New Olympia*. Do you know it? One of these highbrow, cliquey, literary reviews which never pay, and one doesn't wonder. Such nasty cleverness. Why should anyone pay half a crown to read it? And then of course he has rather expensive habits and drinks far too much. But now it doesn't matter any more."

"What do you mean?"

"In a few weeks, even days, Simon will be quite a rich man."

"Really?"

"Yes. Herbert's only surviving uncle, Jaspar Malynson, has had a stroke and may die any day now. He wasn't expected to survive so long. A month ago the doctors said he was dying. He was a very successful stockbroker and he left all his money to Herbert, his favourite nephew—oh, he made no secret of his intentions—and in event of Herbert's dying before him, to his other nephew, Simon. You see?"

"I do see," Benedict said.

He shut the diary with a snap. In fact Herbert's death might be considered providential for Simon. And was that what he, Benedict, was supposed to think? Had Lady Malynson taken him into this room for the sole purpose of his finding this diary? And then the entry itself, was it genuine? Oh, heavens, his head swam with suspicions. If one once started on faked evidence, there was no end to it.

Aloud he said, "And where does Mr. Simon Malynson live?"

"In London. But he's down this week-end staying with Rose again, if you wanted to see him."

"Yes, I should like to see him sometime."

Clearly that was what he was expected to say, for Lady Malynson nodded approval.

"Yes, I told Rose on the telephone just now that you

might be down—that you were looking into things for me. I wonder whether you would mind at the same time taking down Herbert's typescript—the *magnum opus* in fact."

"Certainly. It would be an honour to be the bearer of a *magnum opus*."

"You are so kind." Her smile was a little uncertain. "Will you come into my sitting-room a moment while I do it up?"

"Of course. By the way, did Sir Herbert make any practical experiments in his laboratory?"

"Oh yes, he was quite a chemist. Always making things for the household. Soap one year. Oh, the smell! But quite good and economical. This year he concocted a special solution for treating sheep fly."

"Sheep fly?" Benedict said. "How interesting!"

"Oh yes, he had so many interesting ideas. There was nothing he couldn't turn his hand to. He did the smallest thing with such finish. You have seen for yourself what a beautiful calligraphy he had."

"Yes, a beautiful handwriting. Did he often use a ball pen?"

"Not often, certainly. He said it ruined handwriting, but I think he carried one about for odd jottings."

"Yes, I see," Benedict said, and shut the diary into the desk. "By the way," he added as he moved to the door, "did he know French well?"

"French?" Lady Malynson looked surprised. "Oh yes, he spent a year or more in Paris as a boy. He was an excellent French scholar."

Was there anything Sir Herbert had failed to do well? Benedict wondered, as he followed Lady Malynson into her sitting-room.

The typescript was bound into a bulging cardboard folder which bore the inscription: *The Monastic Way of Life. A Historical Survey by Herbert and Sonia Malynson.* "He

insisted on my name appearing with his," she explained. "He said we were the perfect collaborators and that without my inspiration it would never have been written. There now, I'll just do it up into a parcel. So much easier to carry! And I know men hate carrying things."

"That depends on what one is asked to carry," Benedict said. "Basic fats and greenish oozing rashers of bacon I particularly dislike. You must be sorry in a way to have come to an end of your *magnum opus*."

"Yes, it leaves a great gap certainly when one's literary children go out into the world—but such a sense of achievement. Sixteen years ago Herbert and I used to talk over the book we would one day write when at last he was freed from his administrative duties to devote himself to scholarship. And for the last ten years we have been collecting the material. And now here it all is—all our labours, our hopes, fears and faith bound into this yellow folder, and Herbert not here to enjoy the success of his work."

"And who is going to publish it?"

"Oh, I haven't really considered that," Lady Malynson said in tones which rebuked Benedict for such mundane considerations. "The important thing, don't you agree, is to do the writing—not to worry about publication and commercial success. It's a pity, I think, that writers in these days seem only to think in terms of getting published."

"They have to live, after all."

"Oh yes, I'm not blaming them. Poverty in an attic I'm afraid no longer inspires artists."

"I wonder if it ever did. I'm not creative, of course. Merely a lawyer who looks at cold facts, but I'm bound to say that my ideas would only be stimulated by such things as—well, liqueur brandy and deer in the park."

"What a materialist you are!" She laughed. "But I don't believe it. At heart you are a romantic."

I am, too, Benedict thought with annoyance. For some

reason he found being understood by Sonia Malynson quite intolerable. He looked away from her. His eye rested for a moment on the open flap of her desk. It was curious that *The Times*, which was lying on it, should be carefully folded back at the page dealing with stocks and shares.

"There now, that's done," Sonia Malynson said, pulling tight the knot of the parcel. "I want Rose to read this and give me her advice. She is quite a historical scholar. Modern social history is her subject, but she knows about this sort of thing. Not that she ever believed in this book. I suppose she was jealous of Herbert and me doing this work together. And then, too, she thinks me far too frivolous to be capable of any serious study. She doesn't understand my capacity for enjoying the variety of life.

"Poor Rose, such a blue-stocking. I remember her coming to stay with us in India. I was determined to give her a wonderful time, but she was only interested in things like the drainage system and vital statistics. And of course men don't like that, and though she is far younger than I am, she got almost no attention—the men I introduced her to all forsook her for me, I'm afraid. Oh, how I scolded them! But, of course, it was no good. If a woman hasn't feminine charm —sex appeal I suppose you would call it these days—she can't expect much success. However, she's a good sort. I'm really very fond of her and I am sorry to see her turning into an embittered spinster. And then Herbert's death was a great shock to her. She was quite devoted to him. That's why she came to live at the cottage. And I am afraid she's rather displeased with me. She thinks I didn't send for her soon enough when Herbert was taken ill. But really in the shock and worry of it all one couldn't remember everything. And she was able to be with him for a few minutes before the end. I purposely left them alone together. Poor Herbert, always so kind. He rallied himself to speak to her—a word of consolation even though he was so pitifully

weak. I'm always so glad to think that this last memory effaced all anger between them."

"Anger?"

"Oh yes, they had a stupid quarrel, you know—two days before Herbert died it was. I only got back very late from Aberdeen. They weren't even expecting me back so soon. And Rose had come up to have dinner with Herbert. And when I got in about half past nine they were having a set-to in his study. Rose can say some very stinging things when she likes."

"And what was the quarrel about?"

"Oh, some nonsense of Rose's. No business of hers at all. She has such priggish left-wing ideas and was objecting to Herbert's business interests. You would imagine from the way Rose carried on that to be a company director was the height of immorality."

"I see. What does she do? Has she a profession?"

"Oh yes, she teaches. It's holidays now of course. But she's so wrong-headed. She must teach in some glorified sort of board school in Salford of all sordid places. As if, as I keep on telling her, the daughters of the upper class don't want education just as much—even more. After all, we've still got some sort of tradition to preserve. There now, if you really don't mind taking this. The quickest way down to Start Cottage is through the little conservatory and across the lawn to the kissing gate at the bottom. The path takes you straight there."

But Benedict left by the door. He wanted to visit the dining-room. It was a large room with three windows looking over the gravel sweep in front of the house. Bancroft was polishing the table. Benedict looked at once at the sideboard, which was bare of everything except a sugar basin and a bottle of medicine.

"Lady Malynson's medicine?" he asked.

"Yes," Bancroft said, squinting up from the table.

"Always taking some stuff or another. Never misses her dose before every meal."

"And do you wait at table?" Benedict went on, turning his attention to the sugar basin, a florid French one of the late eighteenth century.

"Yes, sir. Her ladyship will have it that way. Always one for ceremony."

"And on the night Sir Herbert died were you in the dining-room throughout supper?"

"Yes, sir. Until I'd served the sweet and then I left them to get on with it."

"Didn't you leave the room at all then? Not after the soup course, for example!"

"No, because the next course was all served up and to save time Mrs. Bancroft had brought it out to the hall and handed it to me at the dining-room door. She wanted to hear a programme, you see, on the wireless. A service broadcast from her home village."

"I see. And when did you lay the table?"

"Just before seven, I suppose it was."

"And did you put out the sugar basin then?"

"I put it out just after I'd finished laying the table. It was empty, you see, and I had to fill it up again."

"You filled it up from what? A packet? A jar?"

"An unopened packet of Tate's sugar, if that's what you mean, sir."

"You filled it in the pantry and carried it straight through to the dining-room?"

"That's right, sir."

"And what time was this?"

"About seven I think. Mr. Simon Malynson arrived just as I was carrying it through."

"Was Miss Malynson with him?"

"No, I think she'd gone straight into her ladyship's room from the garden. But Mr. Simon came in through

the front door. Sir Herbert was expecting him in his study."

"I see. And then you put the sugar on the table?"

"On the sideboard as a matter of fact."

"I see. And when did you clear the table?"

"Not till the next morning—not with all the commotion and shock and all."

"And you cleared the sugar basin too, then?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

"On the sideboard same as where I'd left it after serving Sir Herbert with the sugar for his sweet."

"Did you notice if much sugar had been used?"

Bancroft looked at him with a blank expression.

"The sugar basin was empty, sir."

CHAPTER IV

BENEDICT breasted a spur of cliff and expected to drop into the sea; instead he slithered down a path cut into the sandstone to a whitewashed cottage which stood on a wide ledge of rock some fifty feet below. He found himself in a small garden which seemed to have at its far end another and probably more orthodox approach from the lower reaches of the cliff. He walked up a path of shingle to a blue front door. On the cliff a stiff breeze had been blowing but here it was warm and sunny, for the cliff above and the close embrace of fir trees which grew with apparent ease in the face of the rock sheltered the cottage from all but an offsea wind. What a pleasant place to live, he thought as he knocked. Of course only a cottage; he had a romantic—some said snobbish—hankering after castle, palace or mansion, and no deer park. But then the view! The door was opened almost at once and he had to snatch his attention from those huge Atlantic rollers, whose foam was like savagely whipped white of egg, to face a woman who was not all the repressed schoolmarm he had been led to expect from Lady Malynson's description. Rose Malynson was in her middle thirties. She was tall, plainly dressed in black, and had a pale and handsome face; from intelligent grey eyes she surveyed Benedict with critical if not actually hostile appraisement.

"Mr. Breeze? Yes, I was expecting you." She had a high, rather staccato way of speaking. "Come in."

"I have brought you Sir Herbert's typescript," he said as he passed into the sitting-room.

"Oh, that," she said, and to his surprise took the *magnum opus* and threw it on to the window seat. "Thank you. I am

afraid Simon is out for a walk. I don't know when he'll be back quite. Won't you sit down?"

Seated in an armchair by a blazing log fire, Benedict could look through the long windows to the sea, which made an incessant roar on the rocks below, and to the lower end of the village which tumbled down the hillside to the semi-circling arm of the stone jetty that formed a safe anchorage for the fishing boats.

"How lovely it is here," he said.

"Yes, will you have some sherry?"

"Thank you very much." He was safe in accepting sherry, he thought. Rose Malynson couldn't be so different from her brother; indeed in this respect she wasn't; the sherry was excellent.

"Quite like a picture postcard," he went on. "Which is how I like my art."

"Yes," she smiled slightly. "A cigarette?"

"Thank you."

He got up to light her cigarette and then sat down again. Her manner was polite and aloof. She was not going to help him, he could see that. It was awkward when silence was a person's strong weapon; he much preferred, in cases of this kind, the great garrulous majority who betrayed themselves in speech.

"I wonder you can bear to leave it for Salford."

"Salford?" She looked surprised. "Oh, I suppose Sonia told you that I worked in a glorified board school there?"

"Yes."

"It is in fact the Roderick College for Women."

"Oh, I know it—one of the earliest centres for the higher education for women, wasn't it? It's affiliated now to Manchester University."

"Yes; how odd you should know it! No one has ever heard of it."

"But then I come from Manchester, you see."

"Do you?" Her tone was more friendly. "It's terrible in a way and yet . . ."

"There's no 'and yet' for me. I was born and brought up there, you see, and finally fled from it to go to Oxford. I wonder you can stand it."

"Perhaps because I was brought up here."

"Yes, it's terrible what one's guilts can do to one."

She laughed and her grave, slightly severe face was lit up with amusement.

"Especially when it makes one abandon one's ancestral home," he went on.

"Oh, has Sonia been taking that line? It isn't ancestral at all, you know, except in so far as my great-grandfather, a biscuit king, bought it in the fifties of the last century. That's why all this snobbishness about family and knowing the best people is such nonsense. Nearly all so-called good families are mixed up with trade if not with actual honest, manual labour."

"How very disappointing!" Benedict said, smiling. "I love ancestral homes. Such a change for me. So above my station. Isn't that liverish-looking cavalier over the fireplace, who drew his sword for King and Established Church, a Malynson then?"

"Yes, he's a Malynson—a family called Malynson lived here at one time, the church is full of their tombs. I suppose that's what made the biscuit king buy the place. But he's nothing whatever to do with us—the cavalier, I mean, though Sonia has traced out the most ingeniously bogus family tree. And now tell me, Mr. Breeze—" she leaned forward as she spoke and looked at him searchingly—"what are you really doing here?"

One could not fob off Rose Malynson with anything but the truth, he realized, and neither would he have wished to do so. He liked her. Her candour and economy of words were refreshing.

"Simply this. Lady Malynson came to see me in London yesterday with regard to one or two seemingly small occurrences which had been worrying her since the death of her husband. And I came down here to go more fully into the matter and to advise her about her legal position. Since then, things have changed, as you know. Lady Malynson has asked me to collect what facts I can about Sir Herbert's death. I may say I am not doing this in my capacity as Lady Malynson's solicitor. My inquiry is an independent one. Lady Malynson understands that."

"I see. And so at last Sonia has come round to the idea that there was something odd about Herbert's death. I suppose the exhumation did it. There is a point where even the most self-blinded are forced to open their eyes."

"Then you always suspected that there was something wrong?"

"Oh, personally I had no evidence to go upon. Sonia never even told me that Herbert had been taken suddenly ill—to spare my feelings I believe. It was Bancroft who rang for me to come. And when I got there he was"—her voice shook slightly although she was making an elaborate attempt to speak in dry, unemotional tones—"dying. He just seemed to me very weak and it didn't occur to me that he was not suffering from the effects of an ordinary heart attack. I have no experience of such things."

"Did he speak to you at all?"

"Just a few words." She seemed in a hurry to pass these over. "He slipped almost at once into unconsciousness. I had no suspicions. But the next day the whole neighbourhood was humming with gossip. Everyone seemed to know that my brother had been poisoned."

"I see. So this present inquiry was no bolt from the blue?"

"Oh, no, no. In fact it is a relief to know that an official

investigation has been started. It will settle things one way or the other."

"And do you know how the police come into the case?"

"The same way as the neighbourhood, I suppose—through Dr. Parkin. Only Dr. Parkin went and informed the police himself, and the neighbourhood heard through his silly gossiping wife."

"And I wonder why he waited nearly a month before communicating his suspicions?"

"Because he is a clear-headed young man, I expect, who preferred to make sure of his job in Yorkshire first of all. Once there, of course, he hadn't got to consider the susceptibilities of Izard St. Petroch in the same way."

"No, of course, no young doctor wants to make trouble for himself. But tell me, what did he do? I only understood from Lady Malynson that he didn't understand Sir Herbert's case very well and that she preferred Dr. Waller."

"Of course she preferred Dr. Waller. The man is a sweet, senile idiot who oughtn't to be allowed to treat anything more severe than a cold in the head. Dr. Parkin, I gather, told Sonia straight out that Herbert had been poisoned. I heard this afterwards from Bancroft, who thought I ought to know about it. And then there was a terrible scene, with Sonia quite hysterical declaring that he shouldn't go near Herbert again and that he must get Dr. Waller at once."

"And then?"

"Well, then Dr. Waller arrived in the middle of all this and was properly shocked at Dr. Parkin's suggestion. Dr. Parkin withdrew and Dr. Waller was able to write a very nice death certificate. Some kind of valvular disease of the heart I think—my brother had some slight cardiac symptoms recently. And so everyone was satisfied—or should have been."

"And you?"

"I didn't know what to think. It was such a terrible shock anyway. I went and saw Dr. Waller, who ridiculed the whole notion of poison in his best rose-water way. And then I went to see Dr. Parkin, who was very reticent and said it wasn't his case and referred me back to Dr. Waller. So, you see, I was no further forward. One's helpless against the easy assurances and the evasions of the medical profession. And then though you may tell yourself that you want only the truth—you don't really want to think that your brother was poisoned."

There was a moment's silence. She bent and stubbed out her cigarette. "And when will they know?" she said.

"Today I imagine," Benedict said. "What do you think yourself? Do you suppose that Sir Herbert was deliberately poisoned?"

"If he was poisoned at all, it is difficult to see how it could have been accidental."

"Please forgive me for asking you this, but I presume there is no possibility that your brother took his own life?"

"Herbert! The last thing he would do. His nature was too happy a one for that. Besides, it would have been against his principles. Our father was a poor and pious parson. With Herbert religion stuck. Perhaps it would have with me had my father lived. As it was, I was a confirmed agnostic at eight. No, you can rule out suicide."

"I see. And have you any suspicions? I mean can you imagine anyone wanting to kill your brother?"

At once he sensed a withdrawal. She was now as watchful as she had been when he first arrived. He could see that she regretted her few minutes of confidence; for this reason her rebuff, though perfectly well bred, came with the greater force.

"And don't you think that that question is better left to the police?"

Her tone was final; the door had been slammed in the face of his inquiry and there should have been nothing for

him to do but to get up, comment again on the view, and go. She seemed indeed to wait for his departure even as she politely offered him another glass of sherry. But he didn't move. There must be another approach, he thought, some crack in this glacial front.

"I quite understand your view," Benedict said. "You feel my inquiries are an impertinence."

"Not that so much as—well, unnecessary."

"It is true that the police will—in fact have already taken charge of investigations. Even so their inquiry is an official one—the full facts will probably not be revealed to you. And sometimes it is of some slight comfort to a family to be in possession of the facts themselves, to know as far as is humanly possible exactly what took place. I propose to try and find out the true facts—it is my only justification for being here."

"And how do you mean to do it?"

"That is my trade, so to speak. You see, I've had experience of these things."

"I see." She raised her eyebrows in an expression of depreciation. "An amateur detective in fact?"

"If you like. I should call myself simply an investigator. Crime is, after all, more a question of psychology than footprints and cigarette ends."

"Oh, the psychological approach," she said. "Isn't that rather overdone? Surely society today is suffering from a heavy overdose of misplaced amateurish psychology? Even my charwoman tells me she is suffering from a severe personality change—instead of admitting it's the plain sulks, which she'd better shake out of. No, I think it is far better to leave everything to the police—to their battery of mass observation and their exhaustive scientific examination of all the facts. Frankly I cannot see that an independent investigator serves any useful purpose. In fiction of course his presence is justified by some emotional nonsense about the

wrong person being in danger of arrest. But in real life that doesn't happen. An independent agent in the field is simply in danger of hampering the police inquiry."

Her tone was perfectly polite; she seemed to be able to speak the truth without embarrassment and to expect Benedict to accept it without hurt.

"I quite understand," he said. "I am glad you have been so frank with me. And now I must be going." He seemed on the point of rising, and then said as though as an afterthought, "Do you know Gladys Hamshire well?"

"I doubt anyone does that. Why?"

"Only that she seems desperately unhappy. And I thought she might be in need of help."

"She's not easy to help, poor thing. The trouble is we none of us love enough. I often think of saying that to my students when they sit copying down notes on the history of factory legislation. 'Stop mugging up all these facts which don't interest you anyway,' I want to say, 'and go out and become mothers' helps, nurses—anything which will teach you to know and love people.' We're so depersonalized these days we don't even recognize others as human beings, let alone love them. That is what Gladys is suffering from. I suppose she's never been wanted for herself—only for what she can give or do. Yes, I'll certainly try and see her, though I doubt if it will do any good."

"She's intelligent, isn't she?"

Rose Malynson looked at him with surprise and approval.

"So you noticed that?"

"Concealed, of course, under that bright little-girl manner."

"Yes, she puts that on in self-defence—in this country at any rate cleverness in a woman is resented."

"Yes, one's fairy godmother could hardly do worse than drop that gift in one's cradle."

Rose nodded. He could feel that she was once more relaxed towards him.

"Especially in the circle in which she was brought up," she said. "The most boring, conventional middle class clinging to the edge of gentility. She should have gone to the university of course. As it was, she left school at seventeen and had immediately to earn to support herself and her mother. She did rather well. She got a job as typist in the office of the *Historical Quarterly Review* and was soon the editor's right-hand woman. She was there for seven years, and then, on its liquidation, she came to my brother—he was a friend of the editor and at that time in need of a secretary. It was a poor choice on her part."

"You mean there was little scope for her?"

"None at all really. And then the continual humiliation of being between servants and family—supper so often on a tray in her room."

"Not only when she had a sick headache?"

"Oh no, not only then, more often than not. How she could endure it! But there—one shouldn't criticize. Material comfort and security count more and more as one gets older, and life at the Court was comfortable and secure enough."

"And was that why she stayed five years?"

"That and—well, my brother was, after all, an attractive man. And kind, too. I think he didn't always realize perhaps . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

Benedict understood perfectly.

"And now all that she has left is her invalid mother?"

"Oh, that awful woman!"

"Is she?"

"Yes, Gladys had her to stay here once. Clinging and oppressive at the same time. She's supposed to have had a heart attack. But she will live for years of course—it's the others who die."

"I believe Miss Hamshire left to go and look after her."

"She left," Rose Malynson said slowly, "because she was given notice."

"Given notice? But I understood——"

"Oh yes, the mother made an excellent excuse. It was hoped that she would go of her own free will—but she didn't of course. How could she?"

"Did Sir Herbert want to get rid of her then?"

"Oh no, Herbert was both too kind and too weak to have made such a decision. It was Sonia."

"Why?"

Rose Malynson made a slight gesture with her hand.

"I find it difficult sometimes to understand Sonia's motives. It was done in the name of economy."

"In whose name what crimes have been committed," Benedict said. "But tell me, she wasn't expecting to leave, was she? I mean she is now packing up her things."

"No, she thought she was going for a short time to tide her mother over a crisis; she didn't know the truth, that it was for good, until the day—the day of my brother's death."

"And was it a great shock to her?"

"Yes, I shouldn't have known about it if it hadn't been that I went up to the Court for drinks that evening—with my cousin Simon Malynson, you know. We walked up by the path from the cliffs—it was a moonlight night—and into the garden through the kissing gate. Simon was going to have a talk with Herbert in his study and he went on round to the front door, but I saw the light on in Sonia's sitting-room and walked straight in by the side door into the little conservatory off her room, you know. And then I found Gladys weeping hysterically on the sofa. I asked her what was wrong. And she sobbed out something about Sonia having given her the sack—and not coming back any more. And at that moment Sonia came back into the room with a glass of

brandy for her. But Gladys knocked it out of her hand and rushed upstairs to her room."

"I see. And was Lady Malynson upset?"

"No. She is admirably impervious to the emotions of others. She just said that Gladys was terribly upset at going —that she now realized that her place was at her mother's side and that she wouldn't be coming back again. And that it was all very upsetting but one had to think of economy."

"Were they really badly off then?"

"Not really. But they were inclined to overspend. And then Sonia had an economy wave—axing anything she didn't fancy."

"And did you see Miss Hamshire again after that?"

"I went up to her room before I left, but——"

"Excuse me, could you tell me in detail exactly what you did?"

"Well, I suppose I could if it's vital to know. That evening is fairly clearly imprinted on my mind. At about a quarter to eight or so I made a move to go, and Sonia came with me into the hall. And I said I would just run up and see how Gladys was. I could see Sonia didn't like the idea—afraid of what Gladys would say I suppose—but she made no objection. She went into the study with some message for Simon and I went straight on upstairs to Gladys's room and nearly fell headlong down an oubliette because that fool Percy had all the floor boards up outside her room. However, she was locked into her room and wouldn't let me in, muttering something about having a headache. And so I came downstairs again just as Sonia and the two men came out of the study together. And we stood for a moment or two talking in the hall, and then Simon and I left together, colliding at the front door with the vicar, who had come to deliver the parish magazine."

"And you and your cousin walked back to the cottage together?"

"Yes, we hurried rather. I was expecting people in to coffee later on. We got back about ten past eight I suppose."

"And did you see Miss Hamshire later that night?"

"Yes, after my brother's death. Mrs. Bancroft called me to her. She was so very distressed—quite hysterical. I got Dr. Waller to give her a sedative. Then the next day she insisted on going to her mother—only taking a suitcase or so with her."

"And now she's back packing up," Benedict said. He considered this, then he added, "Do you happen to know anything about a will being destroyed?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know precisely. Miss Hamshire seemed rather interested in the penalty attached to destroying a will."

"Oh!" Rose spoke sharply as if his remark was of sudden significance to her. An expression of reserve showed on her face. "Gladys does get hold of some odd ideas sometimes. She can be maddeningly irritating and yet one is so very sorry for her. I will certainly try and see her. Must you really be going?"

Benedict, who had in fact only moved slightly in his chair, now got up, realizing that this time at least he had received his dismissal. He looked for a moment out of the window. What a jolly scene below, he thought; there were puffs of white cloud scurrying over the sky and the sea was a choppy green with occasional creases of purple. He looked back into the room at the sad face of Rose Malynson, who seemed wrapped in her own speculations and momentarily oblivious of his presence, and then beyond her his eye travelled to a photograph standing on a small side table. It was a snapshot of Sir Herbert appearing handsome, genial and at ease in the garden of the cottage.

"What a good snapshot," Benedict said.

"Yes, Simon took that. A very good likeness."

"I should imagine so. Much better than those more elaborate photographs that Lady Malynson has."

"Oh, those preposterous stuffed pieces. No, Herbert wasn't a bit like that."

"And what was he like?" Benedict said.

He expected a rebuff. But instead she said at once, "A man who loved life and who only wanted to be left alone."

CHAPTER V

As Benedict walked back to the Court a number of phrases arranged themselves in his mind, words which had been used to describe Sir Herbert Malynson: Lady Malynson, "*un chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*"; Mrs. Hawkins, "a lovely gentleman"; Bancroft, "he was an officer of course but a good man all the same"; Mrs. Bancroft, "a real gentleman", "a very thoughtful gentleman"; and finally Rose Malynson, "A man who loved life and who only wanted to be left alone." And perhaps most significantly of all, Gladys Hamshire, who had refused all comment. Yes, all these people had clearly cared, in their own way, for Herbert Malynson, and all, except Gladys Hamshire, had contributed in words to a picture of a lovable man who appeared to be without an enemy in the world. Why then should he have been poisoned? What were the inner secrets of his life? Or were there none? Had his life been as successful, honourable and open as Lady Malynson had made out and was his removal simply a matter of expediency undertaken for gain? And who gained? Lady Malynson directly, and indirectly it seemed Simon Malynson.

Still pondering over this, he entered the garden by the kissing gate, the way that Simon and Rose had come on the evening of Sir Herbert's death. How pleasantly the house stood on the top of the rising lawns as if it had never been built but had grown naturally out of the ground. Commodious cellars, whose arched and barred windows one could just see above the level of the grass border which ran along the edge of the house, raised the ground floor several feet above the garden, so that Benedict had first to climb several steps before he entered the little conservatory which

gave access to Lady Malynson's sitting-room. As he opened the outer door, moist warm air pressed round him and the smell of exotic vegetation rose in cloying waves to his nostrils. He passed between tiers of wooden staging holding pots of rare ferns, homely chrysanthemums, the miraculous whiteness of arum lilies, and a forest of cacti, and thick-leaved plants, spotted in strange colours, or bearing bright berries which one knew instinctively to be deadly poisonous, to the french window leading into the sitting-room. His hand was on the latch, he had even opened the door a little way, when the sound of voices from within made him pause. He stood listening unashamedly between two tubs of orange trees bearing green fruit. Sonia Malynson's voice, raised in pained vexation, and the grating tones of Bancroft were plainly recognizable. "Naturally what you have said makes no difference to me. I only want to do what is right, what would have been his wishes." "Quite so, madam. I think the arrangement will be to our mutual benefit. Naturally Mrs. Bancroft knows nothing about it. It is just between ourselves." Benedict pressed his ear nearer to the window, determined not to lose a word of a conversation which, apparently innocent, had in its undertones, in its unspoken reserves, the flavour of blackmail. A sudden crash made him spin round; a pot plant had fallen off the wooden staging and lay broken on the stone-paved floor. He raised his eyes to the empty space from which it had fallen, and met from under the fingered leaves of a palm tree the bright but secretive gaze of a youth.

"What are you doing there?" Benedict demanded.

The boy did not reply at once but continued to look at Benedict with an air of amused complicity. " 'Elping Dad move the chrysanths," he said at length.

"Oh, you're Percy Hawkins?"

"That's right, sir," and he jumped down from the staging.

Benedict glanced at the french window. No one seemed to have heard the noise, but he was taking no risk of being overheard himself. He moved to the outer door of the greenhouse and Percy, as if he knew without being asked that his company was desired, followed him.

"I wanted to have a word with you. It's lucky we've met."

"Yes, you'm the private detective," Percy said in his soft Devon voice.

"Well, yes," Benedict agreed. After being surprised in the ungentlemanly act of listening in to his hostess's conversation it was better to let it go at that. "I believe you were here on the night Sir Herbert died?"

"That's right." From out of round, pasty flesh the eyes shone with an eager, almost malicious intelligence. "He was a proper gentleman, Sir Herbert. Always all right to me. And if there's been any funny stuff I'd like to find out the bloke what did it, see."

"Yes, I can understand that. Now suppose you tell me exactly what you did on that evening."

"Well, nothing special, you know. I came up to practise on the piano in the old nursery—Sir Herbert always let me do that in the evenings and Saturdays when I'm not working. I wants to get into a dance-band, see. Jazz is what I likes. Not that classical stuff. It's all right in its way I s'pose, but it's got no rhythm about it. And I was playing away—hadn't long come back from work—when Mrs. Bancroft came in and says to me sarcastic like, 'Well, now there's a real job of work for you to do.' 'Oh, what's that?' I says. Well, it seems some of the lights had fused. And I works in an electrician's shop so I knows about that sort of thing. And I went upstairs to the fuse boxes——"

"Is that in the corridor by Miss Hamshire's room?"

"That's right, sir. Well, sir, I had a look at all the fuse plugs, and one was blown and I did that all right. And then I

thought there was some shorting going on and I had the floor boards up. And a lucky thing I did, sir, because the flex of one circuit was worn through—rats, if you ask me, and the bare wire exposed."

"And did anyone come along the corridor while you were at work?"

"Yes, sir. Just as I'd got to the fuse boxes Miss Hamshire came running along from the landing way. Seemed ever so upset. I could hear her sobbing to herself. And then she shut herself in her room and I heard her turn the key."

"And did she come out again?"

"No, sir, not while I was there."

"And what time was that? Have you any idea?"

"Just after seven, sir. 'Cos I 'eard the clock on the landing chime just as I got to the corridor—came up from the kitchen way, see."

"And did anyone else come up to her room?"

"Miss Rose did—a good bit later on that was. I had all the floor boards up then and she nearly fell through. And she knocked on Miss Hamshire's door but Miss Hamshire wouldn't let her in. An emotional sort of young woman, you know. Always rather grand in her ways, too. 'Well now, Percy, how's the music getting along?' Oh, by the way she spoke you'd think she was the Queen of England. It was her manner I s'pose."

"And when did you leave the corridor?"

"Soon after Miss Rose went down. I'd finished the job, see. I only had to put the floor boards back. And that didn't take many minutes. It must have been eight, I suppose. I heard the gong go."

"And you are sure you never left the corridor during the time you were working there?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"And what did you do then?"

"Oh, I went and had a tune or two on the piano again.

And then I went down to the kitchen—to put back the tools——"

"Was that when you ate the chocolate trifle?"

Percy's pasty cheeks went a deep red.

"Well, I did as a matter of fact. Mr. Bancroft had just brought the things out of the dining-room. And I said, as a joke: 'That looks a bit of all right. You made that special for me, didn't you, Mrs. Bancroft?' Just my joke, see. And she was at the stove. And I don't think she rightly heard what I said. And she just said absent-minded like, 'Yes, Percy.' And so I ate it up. Wasn't more than two spoonfuls in it. And you should have heard the fuss. Think I'd eaten the whole blinking larder by the way she went on. So I buzzed off to my place. And that's all I knows about it, sir."

"And no ill effects? No indigestion or anything?"

"Oh no, sir. I never suffer with anything like that, sir," he said in tones of surprise, then the light of intelligence dawned in his expressive eyes. "Oh, I see what you mean, sir. Sir Herbert, he ate the other trifle. And to think I'd never thought of that! Well, I'm blowed!"

"Well, keep it to yourself," Benedict said, and added impressively: "You and I, Percy, are working on this together. Mum's the word. We'll talk about things another time."

"You can rely on me, sir," Percy said, his eyes almost bursting out of his head with excitement. And then catching sight of his grandfather's slow, arthritic approach along the path, he fled back to the chrysanthemums.

Benedict, also without waiting for Hawkins, made off down the path in the opposite direction. He rounded the house by way of a shrubbery and went in by the front door. He made straight for the library. This still retained something of the soothing immutability of books; the cataloguing of Gladys Hamshire with neat black captions on the bookshelves; pink scalloped bowls of light on the cornice; a red-lacquered table and a fan of scarlet paper and some

gilded fir cones in the wide fireplace were the only intrusion on the sobriety of years. The library was of wide range and Benedict had already noticed, on his first visit to the room, a section of books on medicine. He made for it now—in the last bay on the left-hand side. Then he paused, his hand upraised. That was odd. The books stretched in regular line half an inch from the edge of the shelf, but *Buchanan's Textbook of Forensic Medicine* stood out from its fellows as if someone had pulled it out and not troubled to put it back with any exactness. It had not been like this on his earlier visit he was quite sure, for his eyes, sensitive to the least asymmetry, would have noticed it at once. He took down the volume now and it fell open at a page which seemed marked by a screw of paper in the inner margin. His eye turned at once to this passage:

"Although pain is in general among the early and well-marked symptoms of the case, arsenic appears in some cases to destroy sensibility. Thus it has been observed that even when the stomach has been found intensely inflamed after death, the patient has not complained of pain during the time which he survived."

"A significant passage, don't you think?" a voice said.

Benedict, startled, spun round with the book still open in his hand. From over the back of an enormous sofa which stood in front of the fireplace, a large red dome of head appeared.

"Mr. Breeze, I take it?"

"Mr. Simon Malynson, I presume?"

"Yes, how do you do."

Simon Malynson got slowly to his feet. He was of surprising, rather grotesque appearance. On his short, underdeveloped body a huge head appeared, growing straight out of the shoulders with almost no visible neck. It was an impressive skull. A profusion of red hair with a slight

suggestion of curl swept back from a high broad forehead; he had a fine beaky nose, deep-set grey eyes and long fat cheeks which seemed pale and damp. There was something a little unhealthy in his appearance. Perhaps Lady Malynson was right in saying that he drank too much. He extended to Benedict a flaccid hand and then, as if the exertion had been too much, he sank down again on the sofa.

"Oh, do sit down," he said with a vague gesture of his hand.

As Simon seemed to be occupying the entire sofa, Benedict took an armchair in the corner of the fireplace.

"This is the only habitable room in the house," Simon went on. "Sonia's excruciating good taste drives one out of the others."

There was something in his high-pitched voice which reminded one of Rose Malynson, but he had not, Benedict realized with relief, any of Rose's reticence. He could look forward to a conversation with Simon, uninhibited by proper family feeling or loyalty to the dead.

"And this is rather a significant passage, too," Simon said. His thumb was stuck in a book, marking a passage. He flicked the page open. "I adore the moralizing of the early nineteenth century in poesy or prose. One day I must really write an article on it. This has a faintly pre-Freudian ring about it. 'Confession is the natural outlet of guilt; deprived of this the most hardened criminal will return to the scene of his crime.' "

"Is that why you are here?" Benedict asked.

Simon gave him a delighted smile. "Neat—very neat. No, I'm drawn like yourself by curiosity."

"One of the most powerful and underrated of human emotions."

"I entirely agree with you. Passion dies, or one outgrows it; even appetite goes with the strain of modern life. Peptic ulcers and powders kill greed. But curiosity remains whether

intellectual or, as in this case of a more personal kind, the desire to explore the secret springs of human actions."

"Or more simply, to pry into other people's affairs," Benedict said.

Simon laughed.

"It's easy to see you've been with Rose," he said. "You carry with you some of her disinfecting truth."

"Yes, she is a very candid person."

"The reverse of dear Sonia, who couldn't tell you the truth if she wanted to. Oh no, indeed, I congratulate you on your profession. It must be one of unfailing interest. I had, of course, heard of you."

"Flattering but impossible. I am quite unknown."

"A friend of mine at St. Chad's Hospital told me something about your activities there a few months ago. And then, of course, there was your war record."

"Oh, that," Benedict said, who recoiled from any mention of his career as an agent in enemy-occupied territory. "I was at the Section, you see."

"Of course. I remember your name now. I don't think we ever met."

He remembered, too, a rather discreditable story of a beautiful Scandinavian woman, reputed to be a spy, with whom Simon Malynson went about, and then his sudden disappearance from the Section.

"And what, may I ask, Breeze, do you make of my late lamented cousin's death?" Simon went on.

"We are still waiting for the findings of the post-mortem examination."

"Of course. But in the meantime we have no doubt satisfied ourselves that Herbert met his death by arsenical poison contained in the sugar he sprinkled so freely on his trifle and that the arsenic was, and indeed still is, contained in his laboratory in a large enough quantity to kill a small army."

"Where did he get it from?"

"Oh, I don't know. Had it a long time of course and in the country we're fairly lax about these things. He had it, of course, for various useful domestic and horticultural purposes—weed-killer, a solution for treating sheep fly, and at one time he treated worm in wood. No nonsense about colouring matter either."

"No, so I observed. Pure white crystalline powder."

"And mixed with sugar the taste would not be noticeable. In fact some authorities assert that there is no unpleasing bitter flavour with arsenic. I've never tried to see."

"Doesn't it strike you as a rather haphazard way of killing someone?"

"Oh, I don't know. Everyone knew that Herbert had a sweet tooth. It was a safe bet he'd add sugar to something during his dinner."

"And so might someone else."

"Yes, I see your point. Random mass murder in fact. But then there was only Sonia and she didn't take any sweet or sugar because she was banting."

"But no one appears to have known that—a new resolution."

"Gracious powers! Why hadn't I thought of that before? Sonia used to be rather fond of sweet things, too. Most suggestive. If anyone had to murder Herbert, then I would so much rather it was Sonia than anyone else in the world."

Simon's light, lazy tones became suddenly venomous. Benedict looked at him keenly.

"Lady Malynson doesn't seem an altogether popular person," he observed.

"No, indeed, a monstrous woman," Simon said. "A compact of envy, hypocrisy, bright poses which she believes in as much as, or more than, anyone else. Now if she had been poisoned there would have been no end of suspects for you. But Herbert—you know, it's very difficult to believe that

anyone would want to kill him. A charming fellow who only wanted to live and let live."

"There seem to be only two people with motives," Benedict said.

"Two? Sonia, of course, since she inherits everything. And who else?"

"Yourself, I understand."

"Me!" Simon looked startled and annoyed. "Oh, I see, Sonia's honeyed tongue has been at work. Poor Simon, one's so sorry for him, his own worst enemy. The intellectual *manqué*—whatever that may mean. That was the line, wasn't it? Always in debt and dunning dear Herbert, and now so lucky with Herbert's death he's on the point of inheriting the vast fortunes of Jaspar Malynson."

"Yes," Benedict said, smiling, for Simon had perfectly hit off Sonia Malynson's way of speaking.

"Well, she's right of course up to a point. Except that Uncle Jaspar is unlikely to leave any great fortune. Heavy losses on the stock exchanges recently. But something like twenty thousand is a cosy thought when you're stony broke, and I've already been able to raise something on expectations."

"You run *New Olympia*, I believe. I've enjoyed the copies I've seen of it."

"Oh yes, that will soon sop up the money. One sets out in hope on a new literary periodical but one knows full well that bankruptcy waits just round the corner. No, I don't think even for that I should have murdered Herbert. It's difficult to know of course—to analyse one's motives. At what point is the emotional urge—the temptation, as our grandfathers would have said—so great that one is driven to murder? I've often wondered about that. In any case, I have taken the precaution of making an alibi for myself."

"Indeed, that was very clever."

"In a case of poison I really think it was—a stroke of

genius you might say. Let me explain. You will remember that Bancroft carried the sugar basin into the dining-room at about seven o'clock. He had just filled it in the pantry from an unopened packet of Tate not for State, so unless he himself is the murderer, then someone popped the arsenic into the sugar basin while it stood in the dining-room between 7 p.m. and when the family sat down to dinner at 8 p.m. You agree?"

"Yes, that seems incontestable."

"Good. Now as Bancroft was crossing the hall with the sugar basin, I came in at the front door. Rose had gone in more quickly by the conservatory into Sonia's sitting-room. But I wanted to avoid Sonia and to have a word with Herbert, who was in his study. As it was I nearly cannoned into her. She came running out of the dining-room with a glass of brandy in her hand—for the unfortunate Gladys you know—and into her sitting-room. I don't think she saw me. I exchanged a word with Bancroft, and then Gladys, blinded with tears, came rushing out of the sitting-room—having rejected the brandy apparently, foolish child—and ran past us and upstairs. Then I went straight into Herbert's study, as Bancroft will tell you, and I stayed there for the next three-quarters of an hour or so. At about ten to eight, I suppose, Sonia came in—all coy about, 'Now you naughty men, gossiping all this time,' and really hating my guts. So I got up to go and we all three of us left the study together. Rose was just coming downstairs from an abortive attempt to see the wretched Gladys. And we all stood talking for a minute or two in the hall, and then Rose and I took our departure. At the front door we met the vicar, and leaving him in animated conversation with Sonia about the Mothers' Union, Rose and I walked down to the cottage and got there about ten past eight or so. So you see I really think that lets me out."

"Yes, unless it was a joint crime."

"A joint crime? Oh, you mean with Rose in on it, and

covering me with a false alibi. But no one could possibly suspect Rose. A woman of the highest principles, devoted to her brother and with no conceivable motive. He left her nothing, you know, except a diamond and topaz brooch worth £100 at the most. She already had a small income under her parents' marriage settlement—all tied up in that ridiculous Victorian way so that she can't touch a penny of the capital."

"That arrangement sometimes has its advantages," Benedict observed.

Simon looked slightly uncomfortable. "Anyway, it lets her out. No, I think I'm very fortunate to have such a sound alibi."

"Very, considering the entry in Sir Herbert's diary."

"His diary? Good heavens, am I betrayed?" Simon cried in mock dismay. "I thought he only wrote things in it like 'fine at seven, rain at eleven'."

"He said that he had had a furious row with you."

"What! But good God, we didn't! I mean, a difference of opinion if you like, but really you couldn't quarrel with Herbert. He was always so awfully nice even when he had to refuse you. What on earth made him write that? He just said in the kindest possible way that he wouldn't put up a penny more for *New Olympia* or anything else, that was all."

"Was he in good spirits?"

"Poor chap, no. He was a man of naturally happy spirits, but so got at by Sonia—to say nothing of the jealous demands of Gladys Hamshire—that he was often reduced to a rather pitiable state."

"He didn't stand up to them?"

"Standing up to things wasn't Herbert's line. He was weak as putty. Couldn't face an emotional scene. That evening he was in a particularly low state because he had had a scene with Gladys Hamshire."

"Over her leaving?"

"Yes. Sonia, I think, had pretty strongly indicated to him that it was time Gladys left for good."

"Why?"

"Ostensibly for reasons of economy. But really I suppose jealousy was at the bottom of it all."

"But why, I wonder, at that particular point? Miss Hamshire had, after all, been here five years."

"Goodness knows. Don't ask me to interpret Sonia's motives to you. They would defy the most acute psychoanalyst. Anyway, she was to go, and her mother's illness was to be made the excuse. Herbert was to explain it all to her. But of course Gladys burst into tears when Herbert started on the need for economy, and in five minutes he was telling her that of course she was coming back, and that as soon as her mother was well enough to be left she would resume her duties as secretary. He might have saved himself the trouble of course, because Sonia herself quickly corrected that little idea."

"Did he speak of any other worries?"

Simon hesitated a moment. "No. Quite enough, don't you think?"

"Certainly," Benedict agreed, wondering what it was that Simon wished to conceal. "Then you wouldn't say that the Malynson marriage was a happy one?"

"She possessed him, if that's what you call a happy marriage."

"Tell me about Lady Malynson. She strikes me as not quite belonging."

"You are an acute observer."

"It's only that I don't belong myself. It makes one quick to recognize that quality in others."

"My dear fellow, we none of us belong these days. Nearly all of us are among the *deracinés*, as Sonia is so fond of saying. Sonia herself, of course, doesn't belong anywhere. Her father lived out in China all his life. He married a little

flower of a wife from Croydon, I think it was, who'd never had an inkling about life and retreated further and further from it. She died when Sonia was about seven. After that, Sonia first stayed out with her father, brought up by Chinese nannies, and then she shuttled backwards and forwards between China and Europe, staying with various families in France, Italy and Spain—her father was anxious for her to acquire culture. So she has. It's like bindweed. And then visits to dreary relations at Croydon, and her father's family in Scotland. Royal blood in her veins, of course. In actual fact her grandfather was a jute manufacturer in Aberdeen who liked the bottle—so did her father if it came to that."

"Not a very happy set-up then?"

"No, miserable. One should feel sorry. That's the curse of psycho-analysis. Like Christianity, it compels compassion. However, I don't. Her father, who was an eccentric merchant of extravagant habits, died when she was twenty, leaving her penniless and with no stable background. At that moment Herbert, on tour of the world after demobilization, turned up. She was beautiful—you must give her that. He fell in love with her at first sight and they were married almost at once."

"And no children?"

"No, they were spared that—the children I mean. What a terrible mother Sonia would have made! It was hard on Herbert of course. He wanted children, and a son in particular."

"He had, I suppose, his compensations—great success in many spheres of activity, for instance?"

"The complete man," Simon laughed. "The soldier, administrator, scholar, country gentleman, not to mention financier. Oh no, Herbert was just a very nice chap, warm-hearted and most lovable, not without intelligence and certain gifts, but not in any way distinguished. He was an amiable dilettante. And why not? Society's rotted by specialists.

And as for that book on monasticism—why he chose such a subject heaven only knows unless deep down within himself he longed to escape from the turmoil of the emotions into the life of non-attachment—nothing but Sonia, who must of course build up one preposterous sham after another, would have driven him to it."

"She was the driving force in his life then?"

"And the destroying force, too."

"Really? Wasn't even his career in India a success, then?"

"That's a long tale," Simon said. He lifted the chintz flounces of the sofa cover and revealed a small cupboard built into the bowels of the sofa. "We must have a little support before starting on that one," he added, and produced from the recess a bottle of brandy and two glasses. "I have successfully raided the cellar, you see. Allow me to pour you a glass. Brandy, like champagne, may be safely drunk at any hour of the day or night."

"Thank you very much. Does Lady Malynson know you are here, by the way?"

"I hope not. She seldom comes into the library. She prefers her culture in more tabloid form. Digests and radio talks. Excellent, isn't it?"

"Superb!" Benedict said, sipping the pale amber liquid. It was indeed an even rarer vintage than he had drunk last night.

"Hine's 1870—the last bottle unfortunately. I feel Herbert would have liked me to have it."

"It's so fortunate that one can interpret so readily the wishes of the departed."

Simon smiled. "Yes, indeed, I assure you I haven't a qualm. Herbert's taste over food and wine was always excellent, you might say inspired. He had a natural flair for the good things of life. And if he hadn't married Sonia he would probably have been a happy man. His choice of career

was excellent. He should have made his mark in India. He got on with people of all kinds, he was a good sportsman, a good administrator, honourable, balanced and sympathetic, with a real feeling for India and its true aspirations. If it hadn't been for Sonia he'd have gone a long way."

"But she was surely ambitious for him—she wanted his career to be a great success?"

"That was the trouble—she couldn't keep her fingers off it. She didn't really go down with the other women. She was beautiful and violently jealous and at the same time expecting the undivided admiration and attention of all the men—it doesn't make you popular. And the more she failed to be accepted, the more determined she was to force their acceptance, to dazzle by the brilliance of his career. Nothing short of a governor-generalship—if not the viceregalty—was good enough."

"What a splendid-looking vicereine she would have made!"

"Yes, a superb figure, I grant you that. And so fond of acting. It would have been second nature to her. But unfortunately Herbert wasn't like that. He hadn't that sort of ambition. He hated bureaucracy and empty show. He was happiest when he was administrating some enormous backward province, when he was out in the wilds away from all superiors, and the dead hand of Whitehall, and incidentally from Sonia, too. But you see, that wasn't the life Sonia wanted—the only white woman for a hundred miles or more—well, that of course she didn't mind—but no white man worth speaking to, either. It nearly drove her mad. Finally she left him for a while on account of her delicate health and went to stay in Delhi—but that wasn't a success either, because without Herbert no one wanted to be pally with her. Well, gradually I guess she began to feel that the role of the Brilliant Administrator had had its day, and she had to look for something else. And so the Great Scholar began.

Obviously he couldn't be a Great Scholar in India—he had to have a suitable English setting, and a flat in Bloomsbury or Chelsea wasn't Sonia's idea of this. Nothing short of the family home would do. Now that had been sold by Herbert's uncle after the 1918 war and only Rose lived there still—down at Start Cottage."

"Oh, I thought Miss Malynson came to live there to be near her brother."

"That is what Sonia is rather fond of implying—she liked to feel that she and Herbert were the centre of attraction—that everyone came to them. In fact she was jealous of the way Herbert on leave used to run down there on his own and stay with Rose."

"Jealous of his sister?"

"Why not? Herbert was older than Rose but they had always been very devoted. And Sonia's the embodiment of jealousy. She was jealous of anyone who took him away from her—of everything which threatened her total possession."

"I see. And so she planned to get back the family estates?"

"Yes, it made a suitable setting. She could pose as the Lady of the Manor, as the wife and helpmate of the Great Scholar. And incidentally it stopped his only bolt-hole—living so close he had no excuse to go off and stay with his sister—and meetings could be much better controlled by Sonia. The only snag was money. Herbert had a small capital but not enough to buy the property and run it in the perfectionist style that Sonia wanted. Now it so happened that Herbert had done most awfully well in fighting an earthquake and famine in his province. He was acting governor at the time. He would, in the ordinary way, have got no recognition, since the British public is totally unmoved by disasters in Asia, but it so happened that the special correspondent of the *Daily Clarion* was near the spot at the time and sent the most sensational despatches home. The

news was splashed all over the headlines, relief funds were started and Herbert's quite heroic efforts were rewarded by a knighthood and a good administrative job in Delhi. He moved there reluctantly, because Sonia had had enough of the open spaces and was in fact living in Delhi already."

"Then she hadn't been at his side fighting the famine?"

"Oh dear, no, though she flew to his side in time to be in for the triumph and the photographs. No, she'd been busy pulling strings in Delhi and trying to augment their income by gambling on the stock exchange there."

"I thought she had no head for business."

"So she always gives you to understand—a mind above money. But at bottom she's in fact both heartless and shrewd. She'd persuaded Herbert to let her have a little of his capital. I heard all this from a rather seedy broker who'd done some of her business out there, and who's always ready to talk indiscreetly over his third peg of whisky. She studied the form carefully and in a small way did quite well in her investments. But never enough for what she wanted. Now Herbert in his new appointment at Delhi was in charge of some scheme—the extension of a railway, I rather think—anyway, something which had to be kept secret to prevent speculation in land. Now for my own part I'm pretty sure that Herbert, who was an honourable man, had nothing to do with what subsequently happened, that he was simply indiscreet in what he said to Sonia, or rather in what he let her worm out of him. The upshot of it all was that when the scheme was publicly launched it was found that there had been a leakage in information—that a certain Indian business man of rather doubtful character, who was known to be in contact with Sonia over her various speculations, had made a large fortune out of land speculation; it was further rumoured that Sonia herself had had a cut out of it. Certainly from that time she had money and was able to buy back the Court."

"Wasn't there any fuss about it?"

"I'd say there was. Herbert was liked by everyone but Sonia had plenty of enemies. Of course the whole thing was kept quiet; that is everyone knew and talked about it, but officially it was secret—there was no concrete evidence to justify official action. The end of it all was that Herbert resigned from the Service ostensibly on grounds of health and came back to England."

"Buying the Court on his wife's doubtful gains?"

"Yes, that is so. Whether he would have liked to renounce them, or whether Sonia managed to persuade him that the money really came from her other investments, I don't know. In any case Sonia would never have let him part with the money. He was caught now, possessed by her completely. No longer could he get away on his journeys into the vast interior of India. He was tied to her for life and even had to write that damned book on monasticism so that she could pose as his inseparable companion and colleague."

"Poor man, what a life!"

"What a life indeed! But I don't wish to exaggerate. Herbert had his compensations. He loved the place and country life and he was too incurably happy by temperament to be always got down by his wife. It was only that the central thing of his life—after all he was only about forty when he resigned—had been destroyed and his other occupations were a bit of a shadow."

"Including his business interests?"

"Oh, they were a shadow, too, of the rather murky kind. He lent his name to one or two companies, you know—he could never get enough money to keep the Court going in the style Sonia thought essential. You've heard of the Blue Coral Amalgamated, of course. Went smash a month or so ago. Fortunately Herbert was out of that just in time."

"I see. In fact, there was a chink or two in Sir Herbert's integrity."

"I suppose if you were a strict moralist like Rose you would say so. Yet I believe Herbert to have been an essentially honourable man, any occasional swerve due to weakness, to the relentless pressure of his wife. The fact is he was so lovable that you didn't really count his faults."

"Yes, I see," Benedict said, and for a moment silently considered this new picture he had of the dead man. Then he added, "Do you suppose he remained faithful to his wife?"

"I've often wondered that. It would have been difficult for him not to have. Sonia was violently jealous and would have made a scene out of the smallest thing. She hardly let him out of her sight if she could help it. He may have been guilty of occasional passing infidelity, I suppose, but hardly anything of a lasting kind."

"He used to go up to London, I believe?"

"Yes, the only escape he got. Two nights every fortnight or three weeks—to get material for his book and to attend to his business interests. He used to stay at his club. I used to see him there sometimes. It's possible, I suppose, that he wasn't only interested in monasticism. I hope she was a comfortable sort of woman—he needed it. Dear me, it's nearly one. I've satisfied my curiosity about a number of things and now I must be going."

"And before you go," Benedict said, "please satisfy my curiosity about one other point."

"Delighted if I can."

"Why did you insert that announcement in the personal column of *The Times*?"

Simon almost dropped the bottle of brandy which he was about to put back in the cupboard under the sofa.

"And how do you know that?" he said.

"It was fairly obvious. Someone closely associated with the family must have put it in, and on the whole you seemed to fit best."

"My impish humour," Simon said, dropping the flounce over the door of the recess and straightening up. "At the time it seemed a good joke. Sonia's so fond of quoting the Scriptures with an air of ineffable wisdom. I thought I'd get my own back. But now I feel rather ashamed about it. It hurt Rose and I shouldn't have done anything to add to her distress."

"And exactly what did you mean to imply?" Benedict inquired. "Were you accusing Sonia Malynson of murdering her husband?"

"No, regretfully I can't see her as her husband's murderess. She had too much to lose by his death. He was essential to her position, and even the pose of grief-stricken widow can't last indefinitely."

"Then what?"

"I was simply chiding her over the little matter of destroying her husband's will?"

"The will," Benedict said. "Ah, so there was one?"

"You know about it then? Surely Sonia never mentioned it?"

"No, but—well, I have other sources of information besides Lady Malynson."

"How fortunate!" Simon looked at Benedict a little uncertainly as if wondering how much he in fact knew. "Then perhaps you already know that Herbert made two wills?"

"No. Please tell me."

"One will shortly after he came to live here, leaving everything unconditionally to his wife. And another a few months ago modifying this—leaving his wife a life-interest only in the property, which was to come to me after her death."

"And why did he do that?"

"Family feeling, I suppose. He always had plenty of that. After all, the property was Malynson—true, only since about

1860—and it had originally been entailed by the biscuit king, who had been keen on handing the place down to posterity. Herbert had agreed to break the entail at the request of his bachelor uncle, who had inherited the place at the end of the 1918 war and was too hard up to go on living there. So I imagine he felt that it should be kept in the family. In fact I know he did because he told me about it. It was last summer. Sonia for once was away at the bedside of a sick aunt in Aberdeen—the one who died just before Herbert's death. And I took the opportunity of getting him to come on a gastronomic holiday with me to the Dordognes. How he enjoyed it! All his natural gaiety of spirit returned in full force. It was then that he told me how sorry he was to have no children—no heir to carry on the name. And he had come to the conclusion that the only right thing to do was to leave his wife a life-interest only in the place and for it to come to me, as his nearest male heir, after her death. He then went on to say he was going to alter his will accordingly, but that he would be glad if I'd keep it to myself. In other words, he didn't want Sonia to know."

"Irritating for her, I can see," Benedict said, "considering it was her money in the first place that bought the property."

"If you can call it her money," Simon said, and shifted his position on the sofa. "In any case the property was bought in Herbert's name. He had the right to dispose of it as he liked. But Sonia was, of course, under the impression that it had been left, like everything else, unconditionally to her."

"And what happened over the will?"

"Well, after Herbert's death I naturally inquired delicately about my future right to the property, only to be told blandly by Sonia that no such will existed. The solicitors indeed had a copy of it, which showed that it wasn't just a phantom idea of Herbert's. But the original was nowhere to

be found. It was presumed that Herbert himself had destroyed it, but I haven't the slightest doubt myself that Sonia found it among his things after his death and destroyed it."

"But surely it didn't affect her very much. She was still to enjoy a life-interest in the place."

"She hates me and would do anything to spite me. The thought of me or my heirs living here after her death would be more than she could endure. Besides, she lost financially. After all, the property with the land and farms would fetch about £30,000 by present-day prices, I suppose. If she sold the property at any time she could enjoy the income of the proceeds, but she could never touch the capital—it would be earmarked for me."

"But it is a serious offence, you know, to destroy a will."

"Oh, she rationalized that one all right. It was what Herbert would have wanted her to do—the second will was just a dreadful mistake, due, of course, to my wicked machinations, which he had never really intended. Her powers of self-deception are quite endless."

"And what did you do?"

"What could I do? Sonia was in an impregnable position. There was nothing to prove that she had destroyed the will. I'd lost, that was all, but I wasn't taking it in a sporting spirit, I can assure you. Hence that loving little message in *The Times*. It took a couple of weeks to appear, and coming out as it did a day or two before the exhumation of Herbert's body it was really far more apt than I had supposed."

"You have forgotten the context," Benedict said.

"The context? Is there one? Some vindictive tag from the Old Testament, isn't it?"

"It's from the Epistle to the Romans actually—'Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink——' "

"Oh, the New Testament," Simon broke in. "I never read it. It's too sentimental for me."

"You mean, surely, it's too realistic," Benedict replied.

Simon raised his head from the cushions in surprise. "You read it then? Oh, of course, I'd forgotten. Aren't you a Catholic? Do Catholics read their Bibles, by the way? I've sometimes wondered."

"Yes, oddly enough."

"To believe," Simon said thoughtfully; "to have faith. What a strange sensation that must be."

At this point Bancroft appeared at the door.

"I am about to ring the gong for lunch, sir," he said to Benedict in a tone which seemed to resent giving the information. "I think Miss Hamshire was wanting to see you, sir," he added to Simon. "I was not aware that you were here. She has gone down to Start Cottage after you."

His eye rested for a moment on the two empty glasses. He said nothing, but his gaze convicted both Simon and Benedict of being drunkards. Then he left the room.

"That man knows and notices everything," Simon said, and quickly put the glasses to join the brandy bottle under the sofa.

"What's his history?" Benedict said. "I see him always rather dramatically in the part of a conspirator—he never seems to belong to that of a butler."

"No, it doesn't fit him. He was unemployed for a long time in Wales—he's half Welsh, you know—Cardiff, during the depression. I believe at one time he joined the Communist Party. Then in despair for work he wrote to Herbert, who offered them both a job here. And so in order to earn his living he had to do work which, so to speak, destroyed him. He had to support a privileged state of society—and who can doubt, whatever Sonia may say about the simple life, that their life here was privileged—which he believed to be thoroughly wrong, rotten, bourgeois and all the rest of it? In fact, he was always in conflict."

"And is he still a Communist?"

"No, not since he joined the Children of Pentecost, a primitive nonconformist sect which thrives round here, but he still hates this sort of set-up. The rich and privileged are not only damned in this world, but in the next as well as far as I can make out. Now I must go. That's the gong. In Herbert's time they always sounded two gongs—with an interval of five minutes in between. Herbert was such a stickler for punctuality. He couldn't bear being kept waiting for his meals. I wonder what on earth that Hamshire woman wants?"

"I think I know," Benedict said.

CHAPTER VI

"And at the head of all the many divine places in Italy I think I must put my beloved Assisi," Lady Malynson was saying over an excellent lunch of roast beef and bottle of 1923 Beaujolais. "Those frescoes! It almost makes one want to become a Roman Catholic. What a deliciously innocent thing was the vision of Giotto! How fortunate that neither he nor sweet St. Francis lived to see the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church in later times. I hope you're not a Roman Catholic, by the way."

"Yes, a convert," Benedict said with difficulty through a roast potato which had dissolved into creamy flakes in his mouth.

"Oh, really. Then you must visit the little chapel of St. Blaise down on the cliffs—a very ancient shrine which fell into decay and has recently been restored. It's used for Mass once a month, but it's always open, I believe. I admire Roman Catholic devotion in many ways, but personally I feel that really enlightened people need no direction. One can rely on one's own religious impulse and can pray better in one's own heart or by communing with nature than by going to any church. But there, I am afraid I shock you with my heretical views. Sometime you must explain to me a little more about all these Roman Catholic dogmas."

"Oh, I couldn't do that," Benedict said. "I always find that non-Catholics know so much better than I do."

"Oh, come now," Lady Malynson said, always a little discomposed by irony, "I thought you were all so well instructed. By the way, did you see Mr. Simon Malynson?"

And at once her voice, which had ranged with such enthusiasm over the joys of travel, took on a different note—one of sharp calculation.

"Yes, I did. Most illuminating."

"Really?" She looked at Benedict and then gave him one of her disingenuously innocent smiles. "I am afraid you heard no good of me. There are moments when I believe he positively dislikes me. Why, I don't know. I have always tried to be cordial to him, though he is not a man I can respect. I do feel, you know, that cheap cynicism is the curse and downfall of our age."

"You will be sorry to hear, then, that as a suspect he is out—he has an alibi."

"Really, Mr. Breeze, you mustn't think that I look on anyone as a suspect. The whole thing is repugnant to me—that anyone could even have contemplated for a single instant bringing about my husband's death is still incomprehensible to me. But what makes you so sure that he has an alibi? I mean with poison . . ." and she spread out her hands to convey her meaning.

"Yes, time is more elastic, I agree. But I think I am right in supposing that the poison was placed in the sugar basin between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m."

"In the sugar—ah yes, I see. Everyone, of course, knew what a sweet tooth Herbert had."

"Simon Malynson seems to have arrived about seven o'clock as Bancroft was carrying through the sugar basin, to have remained with Sir Herbert until about ten to eight, when you joined them, I understand, and then to have left with Miss Rose Malynson a few minutes later and walked with her back to the cottage. In fact, he was never alone——"

"Oh, but he was," Lady Malynson interposed.

"Really? When?"

"For a few minutes only, it is true. Now let me try and get this clear; the events of that terrible day are imprinted on my mind, but rather in the way of some gigantic nightmare—not in the ordinary sequence of time or place. I was with Rose in the drawing-room. I expect she told you what

an upsetting scene we had had with poor Gladys." She paused and looked intently at Benedict, who murmured assent. "Then I needn't go over all that again. She was so upset that I had to go and fetch brandy for her—but she wouldn't touch it. She's such a prickly person—so difficult to help. She rushed upstairs to her room, and Rose and I stayed downstairs in my sitting-room talking."

"About anything in particular?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly. About Gladys a little, of course. Rose said she oughtn't to go back to her mother—Rose has such a thing about mothers. You would think she was quite without filial affection to hear her. Of course, her own parents died when she was quite young—that's why she's always been so devoted to Herbert—so she doesn't quite understand. Though I must say I treasure the memory of my own beautiful mother who died so young—the little flower, as my father always called her. But I am digressing. Well, we were talking about Gladys when I thought I heard the front door bell. I was half expecting the school-mistress, who was coming to see me about the Pageant—do you know it? Such a charming thing by Christina Rosetti. The school-children are doing it to raise funds for the church. And I thought Bancroft might have slipped down to the chapel—they never stop having prayer meetings and things there. And I went out to answer the front door. But Bancroft was there after all and had called Herbert out of his study to see someone."

"Who was it?"

"Oh, just someone from the village about a meeting." Lady Malynson spoke quickly as if anxious to pass over this incident. "Herbert was so accessible to everyone—giving help and advice without thought of his own convenience. He almost at once shut the door on his visitor and turned back into the hall. And I said, 'That wasn't Miss Stokes, was it?' and he said, 'No; someone about a British Legion meeting.' And then I said Rose was with me, and he said

he would join us presently but that he still had one or two things to discuss with Simon."

"And did he go straight back into the study?"

"No, as a matter of fact he went into the cloak-room—the next door beyond the study, you know. I walked out into the porch to see if there was any sign of Miss Stokes. It was such a pleasant moonlight night—later it turned to rain, I think—and after that terrible scene with Gladys I was thankful for a breath of fresh air."

"How long did you stay there?"

"Half a minute perhaps—not more. Then I turned back into the hall and took out Rose's brown cloak and hood she'd lent me for some theatricals, only it was too large, and put it on the chair so that she wouldn't forget to take it with her. And then I joined Rose again."

"And how long was Sir Herbert out of his study, do you think?"

"About five minutes."

"As long as that?"

"I hardly call five minutes long."

"It is longer than you might think. You can do a great deal in five minutes."

"It was not less than five minutes," she said in the sharply emphatic tones which she employed when she wished to drive a point home.

"Yes, I see. And during that time Simon Malynson was alone in the study?"

"Yes, and of course Herbert was careless about the laboratory. Nothing ever locked, you know. Not, of course, that one could really think for a moment——"

"And even if one did," Benedict said, accustomed by now to Sonia Malynson's half-breathed suspicions, "it is difficult to see how he could have left the study and crossed the hall to the dining-room unobserved. You say you were only a minute in the porch?"

"Yes, barely that. Of course, that window is a french window," she said, pointing towards the middle of the three windows which looked on to the gravel sweep.

"You mean he could have got out of the study window, and come round the house and in at the french window and back again? On the face of it, it doesn't seem very likely."

"In this—this tragedy, does anything seem likely?" Sonia Malynson said. "Or I suppose he might have come back."

"You mean after he left the house? But then he has an alibi. He was with Miss Rose Malynson."

"Oh, with Rose." She laughed.

"Why do you laugh? I should have thought Miss Malynson a very truthful witness."

"No woman can be relied on to be truthful when the man she loves is in danger. You must surely know that, Mr. Breeze?"

She looked at him with a slightly provocative smile; she seemed pleased at his real surprise.

"In love?" he said. "I knew they were cousins—close friends, perhaps——"

"Oh, a very natural mistake. I always feel that first cousins should be like brother and sister—anything else always seems to me a little—well, you might almost say indecent."

"They are not, I take it, engaged?"

"No, nor likely to be. Poor Rose. I'm very sorry for her at times. To love and not to be loved in return—it must be terrible. It's not an experience of which I have any personal knowledge—my own life has been so rich in love—but still I can enter a little into her feelings."

"You mean that the affection is entirely on her side?"

"Not entirely. Simon is fond of her in a quiet unemotional sort of way—and like all men enjoys eating his cake and having it too. He turns back to Rose when things are difficult—when his other hopes have failed. He had a long affair with a married woman—a disgraceful case; he

was quite besotted by her, but when he was at last cited as co-respondent he refused to marry her."

"That doesn't argue great love."

"Oh, but that is just typical of Simon—he never wants to commit himself. No sense of responsibility—he remains very much, you know, in spite of his vaunted intellect, an undeveloped adolescent given to stupid jokes and pranks. Poor Rose is a sort of mother to him—she loves and bears with him and gets nothing in return. She is very reserved and never speaks of it. But I know you won't let this go any further. I only told you because I think in a case of this kind one can't be too meticulous in giving all the facts. Shall we have coffee in the next room?"

They went into Sonia Malynson's sitting-room. Bancroft brought in the coffee. He put down the tray beside Lady Malynson on a low table of beaten brass supported by wooden legs carved with lotus flowers. His movements were clumsy; for a moment the coffee-pot of salmon and gold porcelain rocked. He steadied it with a thumb; black hairs grew down the backs of his hands and bristled from under the cuffs of his suit.

"Oh, do be careful, Bancroft. It's so fragile."

Bancroft took no notice of this. He pulled the table within reach of Lady Malynson and then, straightening up, looked at her with a smouldering gaze.

"If that's all, my lady, I think I'll be stepping down to the chapel for half an hour."

He spoke aggressively as if he were giving orders rather than asking permission. Lady Malynson, sitting with upright grace on a chair of shining striped satin, inclined her head and said in tones of resigned sweetness, "Of course, Bancroft, that will be quite all right."

He left the room. It was curious, Benedict thought again, that his tread should be so silent when there was so much repressed fierceness in his nature.

"Really, Bancroft is rather a trial," Sonia said. "He can never leave that mission alone. He has such an awkward manner, too, but his heart's in the right place."

"They're leaving at the end of the month, I think you said?"

He was watching her closely as he spoke. Her hand shook slightly and she spilled some of the coffee she was pouring into the saucer. "Oh, how silly!" she exclaimed. "Such an unsteady hand. You would think I drank. What were you saying? Oh, the Bancrofts. Oh, I don't really know. They seem so attached. I must think of their feelings and let them stay on here until they can really get set up in this temperance bar in Plymouth."

"And how are they financing it?"

"Oh, I don't quite know. They're frugal people and I suppose they've saved steadily. No other claims on their money, you know. And naturally I shall do what I can to help them."

"Sir Herbert didn't leave them anything in his will?"

"No, he made the will shortly after the Bancrofts had entered his service. And in any case he left everything to my discretion."

"And was that so even in the later will he drew up?"

"The later will?" She looked startled. "What do you mean? There was only one."

"Only one will which was valid, but I understood Sir Herbert did in fact make another will a few months before his death."

"Oh, that—yes. I suppose Simon has been making exaggerated statements about being cheated out of his inheritance."

"I understand that he had certain expectations."

"Oh yes, it was all most unfortunate. Herbert was always so indulgent about his family. Last summer he and Simon went on holiday together—a sudden unexpected arrangement.

I had been called to the sick-bed of my aunt in Aberdeen—such a long way and I've had to do several trips there in the last twelve months. I suppose Herbert was lonely. Anyway he and Simon went off wine-tasting in the Dordogne, and I am afraid Simon rather worked on Herbert's feelings and induced him on his return to draw up another will, leaving the property after my death to Simon—his nearest male heir."

"And did Sir Herbert tell you of his intentions?"

"Not exactly. He was always so anxious to spare my feelings, you see. He knew that any mention of making a will upset me. Idiotic I know. But when you love someone devotedly, how near you live to the terror of separation."

"Your solictor here, I understand, drew up the will?"

"Oh yes. And they still retained the copy at the time of his death. He had neglected to tell them that he had changed his mind and destroyed the original."

"You know for certain that he destroyed it himself?"

"I have no actual proof, but I am quite sure he did. I don't think he was ever quite happy about having made it. Otherwise why did he leave the first will among his things? Why hadn't he destroyed it? About four or five months ago came all that scandal of that divorce case in which Simon was cited as co-respondent. Herbert was very much upset by it. The good name of the family meant so much to him. I am quite sure that after that he felt that Simon was quite unsuited to any position of trust. He always looked upon owning the Court as one of trust—responsibility for the land, the tenants and good neighbourliness was a very real thing to him. And I am quite sure it was then that he destroyed the will. Of course Simon was very unpleasant about it. . . . Oh dear, it's not only the horror of death and separation that one has to endure but all the sordid vexations which follow."

"Very distressing of course," Benedict said. "Tell me: in this second will did Sir Herbert make any other bequests?"

"Oh, what does that matter? The will is destroyed."

"Quite so. But no one was to know that."

"Oh, I see what you mean. I had never thought of that before. Someone I suppose might have known his intentions. He was very careless in leaving his desk and drawers unlocked. Yes, he left a bequest of five hundred pounds to Miss Hamshire—a great kindness on his part. He knew how badly off she was and burdened by that invalid mother—and four hundred pounds to Bancroft."

"Four hundred pounds? That is quite a large sum to someone in Bancroft's position."

"Yes, I suppose it would be. Yet I know Bancroft would not fall for such a contemptible temptation. Alas, I wish I could think the same of everyone else. When I think of Herbert's kindness to him, his forbearance and generosity —but there, I mustn't allow myself these suspicions. I suppose in a way we are all suspects. And that brings me to a point which you have too much delicacy to ask me, Mr. Breeze. My own movements on that terrible evening—please feel that you may ask me anything you wish."

"Thank you, but I think your movements are fairly clear to me. You came into the sitting-room with a glass of brandy for Miss Hamshire—that was before the sugar was put in the dining-room. You stayed in the drawing-room with Miss Rose, except for two or three minutes in the hall. Did anyone see you in the hall, by the way?"

"Probably Rose. For some reason she came to the door of the drawing-room. And of course Bancroft, who was in the hall by the service door."

"Ah yes, and then after that you and Miss Rose were together until about ten to eight, when you went to the study, and she upstairs to Miss Hamshire. After that you were all four in the hall together, and then Miss Rose and Simon left and the vicar arrived all at the same moment. How long did the vicar stay, by the way?"

"Only a few minutes. Herbert asked him in for a drink, but he refused because he was in a hurry to get back. And Herbert went into his study again and left the vicar and me in the hall fixing the next Mothers' Union meeting and speaker. And then Bancroft banged on the gong—and the vicar left precipitately. He was in fact on the point of going. And Herbert came out of his study—he was never a moment late for a meal—quite a ritual with him—and we both went into the dining-room together. I do hope I make myself clear."

"Perfectly."

"I am glad, because I can't think of that awful evening without emotion, without——"

She broke off sharply as the door opened and Gladys Hamshire sidled into the room with the motion of someone who is not quite sure of her position.

Sonia gave her a quick smile. "Oh, Gladys, there you are. Good. Have you come to join us for a cup of coffee?"

Gladys stood glumly at the door.

"I don't take coffee," she said. "I came to tell you that Miss Stokes and the children are here."

"Oh, the Pageant. Good gracious me, I'd almost forgotten about it! And the dress rehearsal is this evening. You'll excuse me, won't you, Mr. Breeze? The principal actors have just come to run through their parts. I had to let it go on. I know that is what Herbert would have wished."

Sonia Malynson rose as she spoke and moved towards the door with an air of grace and assurance which made Gladys Hamshire, who stood looking down at her toes, seem like some overgrown awkward schoolgirl. "How are you, Gladys? I do hope you feel more rested."

She held out her hand and seemed about to place it lovingly on the girl's shoulder; but Gladys flinched away as though from a physical blow.

"Oh, I'm all right," she muttered.

"I am so glad. There's nothing like a good night's rest. Now stay and talk to Mr. Breeze."

And with a kind permissive smile Sonia Malynson left the room.

A constrained silence followed. Benedict, who had got up, stood silently by his chair. Gladys remained near the door as if occupied with her own thoughts. Her hands were clasped in front of her, the fingers interlocked, the thumbs free and rotating rapidly.

"Won't you sit down, Miss Hamshire?" Benedict said.

She showed no sign of having heard him, but she moved into the room. Her hands fell apart, and then began to fiddle with the belt of her dress. She didn't look at Benedict or at anything in particular; her gaze, though directed downwards, seemed to be turned in to herself as though seeing her own thoughts. She moved past him down the room. For a moment she stood by a small table and allowed her hands to rest on the glossy cover of *Vogue*.

"Skirts are longer," she said unexpectedly.

"So I believe."

"I'm hopelessly old-fashioned"; she gave a little laugh.

She had turned and was now facing Benedict, but she was still looking down—this time, it seemed, at the length of her skirt.

"As a mere man, I wonder ladies are not content to stay still," Benedict said for the sake of saying something, "and let fashion catch up with them, instead of vainly trying to catch up with it."

"Oh, how clever," she said, and looked up at him suddenly. He was startled. Eyes of a currant, eyes of a boot button—how wrong such comparisons were; her eyes weren't as gentle as a currant, as inexpressive as a boot button; they were charged with malice and misery. "You said I could speak to you if I needed help——"

"Of course. I shall be glad if I can help you in any way. Won't you sit down and tell me about it?"

"I thought I ought to see Rose Malynson first," she went on without attending to him. "But she won't listen. She turned a deaf ear. She seemed to think I was mistaken, but there is no mistake. I can prove it. I have all the necessary evidence, you see—here," and she tapped the pocket of her dress.

"What evidence?"

"I'll tell you and you shall judge for yourself——"

She stopped short; or, more exactly, her words were lost by the door being thrown open and Mrs. Bancroft, like some desperate hen who sees destruction threatening her brood, floundered into the room, crying, "If you please, my lady, it's the police."

Two square figures—one, dark-haired in blue, the other, following, with orange hair and a bright check suit—came into the room. There was something menacing in their solid but restrained advance, in the impressive scrutiny which they seemed to fix on the world.

"Oh dear, her ladyship isn't here," Mrs. Bancroft said, as if unable to cope with this unexpected situation.

"She's rehearsing in the drawing-room. Will you please tell her?" Benedict said.

He moved towards the door. The figure in the blue suit halted; his companion stopped a pace behind.

"Well, I'm blessed if it isn't my old friend Benedict Breeze," Inspector Sussex said.

He and Benedict, old war-time comrades, shook hands; Sergeant Berry was introduced. There was an air of cordiality and indulgence. The Inspector looked like some genial father unbending towards a naughty but engaging child.

"And so you've beaten me to it," he said. "Always in on any excitement, it seems. A funny sort of solicitor you must be."

"I am. But at the present moment I'm acting as an independent investigator."

"So you know—already?"

"There is nothing in that—everyone seems to."

"Yes, there's been a lot of gossip."

"Founded on fact, it would seem."

"Oh yes, there's no doubt about that. The P.M. results show that Sir Herbert Malynson met his death by poison—some eight grains of arsenic contained in the last meal he ate."

There was a slight noise, a breath drawn sharply so that it sounded like a cry. Benedict turned round. For the moment he had forgotten Gladys Hamshire. Now he saw her leaning over the back of a prie-dieu chair, staring at the Inspector with eyes which seemed almost to burst out of her head.

"This is Miss Hamshire—Inspector Sussex——" Benedict began.

"Yes, I'm Gladys Hamshire, secretary to the late Sir Herbert Malynson," she said, recovering herself and speaking in a factual way. "Are you the police officer in charge of the investigation of his death?"

"Yes."

"Then I wish to make a statement."

"Certainly." The Inspector never used words unnecessarily; silence was his great strength.

"I wish to accuse his wife, Sonia Malynson, of poisoning her husband and then of destroying his will by burning it in the study grate."

The Inspector showed no emotion. "Just so," he said. "Do you wish to make a statement now?"

"Of course. I have the evidence with me."

"Then will you sit down, please? This is Sergeant Berry. He will take down shorthand notes so that we have an exact record of what passes. You will be shown it afterwards and can sign it if you wish."

"Would you rather I went?" Benedict said with reluctance.

The Inspector glanced at Gladys Hamshire.

"No, don't go," she said. "There is no reason why everyone shouldn't hear what I have to say—it is the truth—the truth at last after all these years." She paused and then went on, speaking with the controlled force of mind and emotion working together: "The facts are simply these. After the death of Sir Herbert, I was naturally very upset—I couldn't settle down and Dr. Waller came and gave me a sedative. But it didn't make me sleep. I just lay as if I was tied up in some sort of dark chrysalis from which I couldn't escape and in which I couldn't rest either. And at last I struggled out of this semi-conscious state. I felt thirsty. And I got out of bed and went to the bathroom to get a drink of water. Then as I walked towards the bathroom, which is the last door in the passage before you reach the landing, I saw that the hall light was on—it spread upwards and gleamed on the glass dome above the stairway and landing. I went to the stair-head and looked down. Then I saw that the study light was on too, and that the door was wide open. I went downstairs to see what was happening. I made no noise, I was wearing soft felt slippers which fitted well. Three-quarters of the way down I stopped. I could see right into the study. Then I saw Lady Malynson—in a Chinese kimono which she often wore of an evening—was standing by the open door of the study. She had what looked like a sheet of paper in her hand. Then I saw her move a few steps to the fireplace. She bent down and the next moment I saw a spurt of flame and heard the faint crackling which burning paper makes. She stood for a moment, waiting for it to be consumed, then she ground the poker into the charred fragments so that nothing should escape. She came out of the study and crossed the hall——"

"Did she leave the study light on?" the Inspector interposed.

"Yes, but she didn't see me. I had pressed myself against the oak panelling of the staircase. I was wearing a brown dressing-gown. She didn't look up, but went straight across the hall to the dining-room. She turned on the light there and left the door open. I saw her standing by the sideboard. Then she took a paper bag out of her pocket and, lifting the sugar basin, emptied its contents into the bag. What she did next I don't know. I was alarmed. I thought I had better get back to my room before she saw me. I slipped quickly up the stairs. On the landing I was plunged in darkness. She must have come out of the dining-room and turned off the light there, and then in the study."

"And how did you know it was a will she was burning?" the Inspector asked.

"Here is my evidence," Gladys Hamshire said in triumph. "The next morning I went down early to the study. In the grate I saw the remains of the paper ash—but not quite all had been burnt. I kept these fragments."

She handed the Inspector an envelope. He drew from it two pieces of thick blue paper singed at the edges.

"'I hereby revoke all previous wills and . . .'" the Inspector read aloud. "And here we have what looks like the signature of one of the witnesses and beneath it the date June 12th, 1949. The first and the last entries seem to have survived. Well, we can compare them with the copy of the will which the solicitors hold. I'll keep these then." He put the fragments back in the envelope. "And what did you make of the sugar-basin business?" he added.

"That she had poisoned her husband by putting arsenic in the sugar and that she was now removing all traces."

"You thought that at once?"

"Oh no, of course not. But then people began talking—and that made me wonder—in short, that made me guess the truth."

"And why do you suppose that Lady Malynson should wish to kill her husband?"

"Why?" Gladys sounded surprised.

"I mean, people usually have a motive for committing murder."

"Oh, but that's obvious. She inherits everything—she even made sure that she lost nothing by burning the later will so that there were no checks placed on her inheritance."

"Just so," the Inspector said. "And you yourself—were you on friendly terms with Lady Malynson and the deceased?"

"I have been here five years."

"Quite a time, certainly, but living in a household is not always easy—there were no disagreements?"

Gladys Hamshire looked amused. Her lips parted in a faint superior smile. "Lady Malynson will tell you herself," she said, "what a happy household this was and how she always looked upon me as a daughter of the house."

"What is this about me?" Lady Malyson appeared in the doorway. Then she made a gracious gesture as though of greeting to the Inspector, who had risen to his feet. But it was Gladys Hamshire who held the centre of attention.

"I was just explaining that you had always looked upon me as a daughter of the house," she said. "And now, Sergeant," she added, rising, and seeming to condescend to him by deliberately lowering his rank, "I think I have given you the full facts. If you wish me to sign that statement later on, I shall be in my room."

"What statement?" Lady Malynson said.

"Just a statement concerning the murder of Sir Herbert."

"His murder?"

"Yes. You see, I know who poisoned him."

And with a new-found air of assurance Gladys Hamshire moved to the doorway; it was Sonia Malynson, advancing into the room, who stepped aside to let her pass.

CHAPTER VII

BENEDICT left Sonia Malynson with the police. The sun had gone in; it was a dark afternoon. He turned on the hall light and went upstairs to the passage which led off the main landing. Yes, here was the bathroom and Gladys Hamshire's room was a little further on the right. He turned and looked back at the landing. A faint gleam of light from the hall below touched the glass dome suspended high above the staircase. He walked downstairs and stopped three-quarters of the way down. There was the study on his right. The door was shut, but were it open he would certainly be able to see into the room. He remembered the exact layout; the desk and the fireplace would be visible to him, he was sure of that. Then he turned and looked towards the dining-room, which lay at the far end of the hall, directly opposite the staircase. The door was open; he could see the sideboard and Bancroft, who was at this moment bending over it arranging silver.

Benedict ran down the rest of the stairs and crossed to the dining-room.

"You weren't long in the chapel," he observed.

Bancroft turned a secretive eye towards him. "I didn't go. I started and then I came back."

"Oh, too much work to do?"

"It's not the work. It's the police. I saw them coming up in a smart cop car."

"And you came back because you thought they might want to ask you some questions?"

"Ah, they always ask questions—hounding people on to destruction. Do you know what causes crime?" He spoke in an excited voice; he was very pink in the face, and

Benedict might have supposed that he had been drinking had he not known him to be pledged to temperance. "Do you know what crime is rooted in?" he went on. "Police and property and drink."

"How?"

"The police trip decent folk up—make it impossible for them to earn a decent living, and property makes thieves just as alcohol makes drunkards."

"And what is the solution?"

"Abolish the sinful institution of the state, private property and worldly pleasures and cleave only to the Lord."

"I see. A sort of Christian anarchy."

Bancroft made no reply. He turned to clear the glasses from the table.

"You have had personal experience of the police, I take it?" Benedict went on.

"What's that to do with you?" Bancroft said, and a thin stem of a wine-glass broke between his fingers. "They go tunnelling into the past." He paused a moment to suck the blood from his finger. "Never leave you alone. Always trying to fasten something on to you."

"Well, in this case there seems nothing to fasten on to you—there are others more closely involved."

"Oh, don't you believe it. It was arsenic, wasn't it? I always thought it was dangerous keeping those drugs in the way he did. Anyone could get at them. I know for a fact Miss Hamshire had some of that arsenic for hat dye or some such nonsense. She told my wife so. And then Miss Rose had some to make up into weed-killer. And then the poison was put in the sugar basin, wasn't it? Who filled the sugar basin? I did. That's good enough for them."

"Nonsense. The police are scrupulous in taking all facts of a case into account, and others besides yourself had the opportunity of putting the arsenic into the sugar basin. Now

tell me something. Did you open the front door to a caller on the night of Sir Herbert's death between seven and eight o'clock?"

"Yes, that's right. I did."

"Do you know what time it was?"

"I can't remember now—about half past seven. I'm not sure, mind."

"And who was it?"

"A lady for Sir Herbert."

"Did you know her?"

"I can't say that I did."

"Was she on foot?"

"Yes."

"Someone from the village, was it?"

"No, I shouldn't say so—sort of foreign-looking and she had a foreign way of speaking, too."

"Foreign? What did she look like?"

"I didn't look particular. Fairish, I think—not young—not old either. And a hat cluttered up with a veil and a lot of flowers stuck round—not what you'd call suitable for a winter's evening, especially in the country."

"And she asked for Sir Herbert?"

"Yes, she said he was expecting her. She didn't give no name."

"And you went and told Sir Herbert?"

"Yes, he was in the study with Mr. Simon."

"And did he make any comment?"

"Well, he asked who it was and wouldn't she give me a message. And then I said she wouldn't give no name, but said he was expecting her. And at that he looked taken aback and came tumbling out of the room to speak to her."

"And where was she?"

"Just inside the front door. She wouldn't come in no further."

"And do you know what happened next?"

"Not exactly. I was at the far end of the hall by the service door, waiting really to see if Sir Herbert wanted anything—always one for offering people drinks and things—and I heard him speaking to her in the outer hall—just the sound of his voice—he was talking in a sort of whisper. And then her ladyship came out of the drawing-room and asked if it was Miss Stokes. And Sir Herbert had shut the door on the lady, and he turned back into the hall and said no, it was a caller about the British Legion."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, Sir Herbert went into the cloak-room, and her ladyship walked out into the porch, I seem to remember."

"Was she there long?"

"Oh no, a minute—or less. Always one for the moonlight. I've seen her in the porch there, addressing poetry to the moon or some such nonsense."

"And then?"

"Oh, she came back in and asked me where Miss Rose's cloak had been put—she'd lent it for some theatrical stuff. And I said it was in the cupboard under the stairs, and she took it out and put it on the chair for Miss Rose to take. And then she went back into the drawing-room."

"And how long was Sir Herbert out of his study?"

"Oh, three or four minutes, I suppose, sir—not more. It's difficult to say exactly all this time after. He came out of the cloak-room just as her ladyship had gone back into the drawing-room, and he went straight into his study."

"I see." Benedict was silent, thinking over these events. Then he said, "And Sir Herbert hadn't said anything to you about expecting a visitor?"

"No, nothing."

"When does the post come in?"

"Once a day—between eight-thirty and nine in the morning."

"And who takes in the letters?"

"The postman comes to the back door and I take the letters through to the dining-room—the family's having breakfast then."

"And you give them to Sir Herbert?"

"No, to Lady Malynson. She likes to have all the post and then she sorts it out."

"You don't remember any letter in particular coming for Sir Herbert round about the time of his death?"

"His letters weren't nothing to do with me," Bancroft said, as if accused of some crime. "Always a lot of stuff—advertisements and appeals and muck of that kind. Ah, now I come to think of it, there was a letter one morning. Now let's see. Yes, the day before Sir Herbert's death, it must have been. Her ladyship had got back the night before. She had been up in Aberdeen—her aunt had died suddenly. Burnt to death by curling tongs. At eighty-four, too—it just goes to show there's no end to human vanity—and then comes the Judgment. Yes, well, I remember I took in the post and gave it to her ladyship. And she asked me to put up the window because the wind was rather keen. And I heard her say, 'All the post for you today,' or something like that, as she gave Sir Herbert the letters; and then she added, 'Whoever do you know living at Pormouth who writes on rose-tinted paper?' "

"And what did Sir Herbert say?"

"Oh, something like 'I didn't know I knew anyone living at Pormouth'—that's the nearest big seaside place along the coast here. And her ladyship said: 'Rather an unusual handwriting with a foreign S. Some beautiful foreign lady you picked up with Simon on that trip abroad, I dare say!' "

"And what did Sir Herbert say to that?"

"Oh, he looked up a bit startled and then he took the letter and laughed and said: 'Oh, I think I know what it is—it's about this new women's branch of the British Legion

they want to start at Pormouth. They want me to address their first meeting.' Something like that. I can't swear to the exact words, of course."

"And did he open the letter?"

"No, I think he sort of put it on one side, but I left the room then so I couldn't really say."

"Yes, I see." Benedict was silent, trying to arrange his ideas.

"By the way, was the front door locked at night?"

"Not until after dinner. Sir Herbert liked it left unlocked so that he could slip in or out if he felt like it."

"One other thing. Did you see anyone go into the dining-room on the night Sir Herbert died after you had put the sugar basin on the sideboard and before the family sat down to supper?"

"Only Miss Rose."

"Miss Rose Malynson?" Benedict was startled. "When was this?"

"Just as I was about to dish up dinner. I propped open the baize door leading into the kitchen quarters and I just caught sight of her standing by the sideboard—the dining-room door was open, you see. Then I turned to pick up the tray and she'd gone when I next looked round."

"Gone? How?"

"Well, through that there french window, I s'pose, sir. I found it unlatched when I came in with the tray."

"And this was just before eight?"

"Yes, sir. I put the tray with the soup down on the sideboard and then I went back into the hall to sound the gong. The vicar was talking in the outer hall with her ladyship, but I couldn't help that. It was striking eight by the hall clock and Sir Herbert was always such a one for punctuality."

"So you sounded the gong. And then?"

"Well, the vicar left at once. And Sir Herbert came out

of his study and he and her ladyship went into the dining-room together and sat down to their dinner."

"I see. And you're sure it was Miss Rose Malynson you saw?"

"Yes, sir. She was wearing that long brown cloak and hood of hers—the one her ladyship put out for her to take. It's very distinctive."

"But Miss Rose had left the house soon after ten to eight."

"So I understand, sir," Bancroft said, giving Benedict one of his blank looks. "Will that be all, sir?"

And without waiting for Benedict's reply he lifted the tray with the dirty glasses and side plates and left the room.

Benedict stood for a moment, frowning down at the carpet. With his toe he followed the outline of an orange triangle of pattern. If only he could make sense of it all. But nothing seemed to fit into place. He walked to the french window and went out on to the steps. He shut the window and then turned the handle; it opened easily from outside. He went down the four steps to the gravel sweep, rounded the corner of the house and, passing through a shrubbery, emerged on the south side by the little conservatory which gave access to Lady Malynson's sitting-room. He went on down the gravel path, paused for a moment by a seat enclosed in a case of clipped yew, and then came to the huge wistaria which grew above the window of the study. The sill was level with his head, but the angle of a drainpipe gave an easy foothold. From it he stretched up to the sash window; it was shut but not latched and opened silently with upward pressure from without. He swung in over the window-sill and met the startled gaze of Simon Malynson, who stood by the open desk.

"Oh, you?" he said. "Well, for goodness' sake shut the window or everything will blow away."

He had his hand on the papers which lay on the desk.

"Sorry." Benedict jumped down into the room and shut the window. "I was just trying out something."

"I should have thought it easier to come in by the door," Simon said crossly.

"Easier, but then if there is anyone in the hall you would be seen, wouldn't you?"

"Well, what does it matter if you are?"

"For those with a lily-white conscience it doesn't matter, of course, but others might prefer not to be seen, particularly between seven and eight on the fatal night."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Your alibi."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Only that you seem to have had about five minutes alone in this room when Sir Herbert was called away."

"Called away? Oh yes, that's right, he did leave the room, but only for two or three minutes."

"Lady Malynson says it was five."

"She would. Her chief satisfaction in life now is seeing the noose tightening round my neck. But even if it was five minutes, you're not seriously suggesting that I employed the time pinching the arsenic out of the lab——"

"You might have done that already on a previous visit."

"Well, nipping with the stuff out of the study window, through the shrubbery, round to the front of the house, in at the dining-room window and back again. I've never heard of such a preposterous idea. I should obviously have waited for a better opportunity than that."

"I think you would," Benedict agreed. "I was merely testing to see if such a thing were feasible."

"And I couldn't know that Herbert would be called out of the room at that moment."

"No. And that brings me to the real point of interest.

You see, we seem to have arrived at that time-honoured character in fiction for whom I always have a particular weakness—the mysterious unknown foreign woman."

"You mean the woman who came to see Herbert was some exotic foreign creature? How damned funny! He told me when he came back that it was someone about the women's branch of the British Legion."

"Yes, that is what he told his wife when she commented upon a letter arriving for him in a feminine and foreign handwriting."

"You intrigue me. From abroad, you mean?"

"No, the letter bore the Pormouth postmark apparently, though Sonia Malynson made some joking remark about it being from some foreign beauty he had picked up on his trip with you."

"Not so joking either."

"You mean he did?"

"Oh no, we were too busy with the really important things of eating and drinking for any but the most passing of glances at the local beauties. I only meant it wouldn't be a joke to Sonia. She was always jealous and resentful of that trip abroad."

"So that Sir Herbert is unlikely to have invited some charming foreign lady to have visited him here?"

"Not only unlikely, but would have run half a mile to have avoided it. He was always terrified of a scene with Sonia. Was she really a charmer?"

"No, probably not. Women so seldom are, I find. I can't get much out of Bancroft—except she was neither young nor old and wore a hat with a veil and flowers which he thought unsuitable for the country lanes on a December night."

"But who was she?"

"That's the mystery. She gave no name. Did Sir Herbert say anything to you which might give some clue?"

"I remember now that Bancroft came in and said there was a lady to see him. And Herbert asked who she was. And Bancroft said in tones of marked disapproval: 'I couldn't say, I'm sure, sir. She gave no name. She says you were expecting her.' And then I do remember that Herbert's chin dropped in a look of consternation. I'm not making this up after the fact. And he muttered to himself something like 'My God!' and aloud he said, 'I'll see her now, Bancroft.' And he was out of the room well ahead of Bancroft. Odd that I should almost have forgotten that incident."

"Not so very odd perhaps," Benedict said in a meaning voice.

Simon looked a little discomposed.

"Oh well, all right; perhaps I didn't want to call attention to having been left alone in this room. But what I'm telling you about Herbert's reactions is quite true. He did seem upset and he was upset when he came back again. He trotted out that remark about the women's British Legion and I went on talking about *New Olympia*. And I could see he wasn't listening, and then he suddenly said irritably: 'Oh, for goodness' sake shut up! I can't help you. I've told you so. Nothing but endless demands on me the whole time. I can't stand it. Women are the very devil.' "

"And what did you say to that?"

"Oh, something non-committal. Gave him an opening to go on talking about it, but he didn't seem to want to, and so I went on to tell him about some good wine going cheaply at an auction and offered to bid for him, and that seemed to cheer him up. I'm afraid that's all I can tell you."

"I see. Well, we are no nearer solving the mystery—if there is one. Perhaps, after all, she was only a worthy worker of good causes."

"I hope not," Simon said. "It seems to me that she is the only point of fantasy in a situation of unrelieved sordid reality."

"The police are here," Benedict said, as if this followed on from Simon's remark.

"Oh, bound to be I suppose. Taking statements all round?"

"They have just taken one from Gladys Hamshire."

"Oh, I wonder what she had to say for herself."

"Simply that Lady Malynson murdered her husband and burnt his will."

"Oh, so she did come out with that. I thought she would. She went to see Rose while I was with you this morning. She said she felt it her duty to tell us both what she knew. But Rose rather discountenanced the whole thing and told her to go away and think things over very carefully before committing herself to any public statement."

"Didn't she believe the story, then?"

"No. Rose said there were too many open doors."

Benedict laughed. "Yes, she put her finger at once on the weak point. It's odd that Lady Malynson should have burnt her husband's will with the study door open."

"And odder still that she should have removed the traces of poison from the dining-room with an open door and in a blaze of light."

"I suppose one wouldn't expect to be disturbed in the small hours of the morning."

"Still, you'd think she'd take the precaution of using a torch, rather than turning on the lights."

"Yes, you would," Benedict agreed. "Of course Miss Hamshire has given the police those two burnt fragments of the will—the police can compare them with the copy of the will which the solicitors hold and if they correspond then at least it is evidence for presuming that the original draft of Sir Herbert's second will was burnt."

"Yes, but he might have burnt it himself—not likely, I agree. Rose thinks that Gladys may have burnt it in order to accuse Sonia of the crime."

"Why?"

"Because she hates Sonia like poison."

"She would be doing herself out of a legacy of five hundred pounds."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten that. But I suppose jealousy might be a stronger motive than monetary gain. Goodness knows I don't want to do anything to help Sonia. She's welcome to the position of suspect-in-chief. You see, Breeze, I find myself in a jam."

Simon opened and shut the flap of the desk as he spoke and then stood looking down at the lock as if scrutinizing the workmanship. Benedict waited attentively.

"You're on the level, aren't you?" Simon went on. "You're not acting for Sonia, but making an independent inquiry into the facts of the case?"

"Yes, those were the terms on which I insisted," Benedict said a little pompously. "You may rely on my discretion."

"I believe I may. And that is more than I can say of almost any one of my acquaintance except Rose. There's no secret most people wouldn't reveal in order to be clever, malicious, in the know. Oh, I'm sick of the whole boiling lot of them. I swear, Breeze, in fact, that if I was a Catholic like you I'd make a vow to the Blessed Virgin Mary—and I don't mean that irreverently—that if I ever get out of this mess I'll give it all up—London, drink, *la vie pseudo-intellectuelle* —and I'll settle in Devonshire, marry Rose if she'll have me, and farm—good honest physical sweat and toil. There's nothing like it. To hell with being clever. Simplicity—that's what we all lack today."

"An excellent idea," Benedict said. "And what is to prevent you from putting it into practice at once?"

"Nothing, except I'm likely to be arrested for murder. You see, Jaspar Malynson has just died."

"Ah."

"Yes, I heard at lunch-time—the solicitor 'phoned through. Estate probably worth about £20,000. And that gets me out of the devil of a hole."

"The usual overdraft?"

"Oh, that, yes, and *New Olympia* was on the rocks. And in an attempt—well, in short, in order to keep things going I dipped into some trust funds I administer for an old cousin. So you see, if Herbert hadn't died so providentially a month before his uncle I might shortly be facing a criminal charge. The police are bound to find that out and to draw their own conclusions."

"Yes, but after all it was a month ago that your cousin died."

"Oh, in case you think it was rather previous, let me tell you that before I came down for that fatal week-end, I went to inquire for Uncle Jaspar at the nursing home, and the doctor assured me he couldn't last the week-end. Only his cast-iron constitution kept him going so long, I suppose."

"Yes, I see."

"Really, I think it is a judgment on me for reading the *News of the World*. I delighted in crime—other people's, of course—but when it occurs in your own family circle, when you find yourself further and further involved by the machinations of fate in a murder which you never committed—it is somehow less entertaining."

"There are other suspects to be considered, you know."

"Who, besides Sonia and me?"

"Five—without counting Percy Hawkins or the vicar, who both seem to have visited the house on the fatal evening."

"Oh, naturally you can leave them both out. But five. How do you make that?"

"To begin with, Rose Malynson."

"Oh, Rose. I told you before she had no conceivable

motive. Besides, she never went near the dining-room that evening."

"On the contrary, Bancroft saw her in the dining-room, standing by the sideboard."

"And you really suppose she was popping poison into the sugar basin? Don't be absurd. Rose is a woman of the highest principles. She wouldn't even murder Sonia, whom she loathes, let alone her brother whom she adored. When did Bancroft see her there, anyway?"

"A few seconds before eight."

"Nonsense. She wasn't even in the house then. We were walking back to the cottage. Bancroft doesn't know what he's talking about."

"He says he saw her quite distinctly—that she was wearing the brown cloak and hood. Did she take it with her, by the way? Lady Malynson said she put it out for her."

"Yes, of course she took it," Simon said with growing anger. "And you can't rely on what Bancroft says. He served a prison sentence before he came to Herbert—only no one is supposed to know that. He's a shifty customer."

"A murderer, would you say?"

"What an absurd question! How do I know what a murderer looks like? The same as the rest of us I suppose. No mark of Cain to distinguish him. Actually in his odd twisted way he was devoted to Herbert. And well he might be. Not many men would have taken on a chap as a butler who'd just done a stretch. No, I don't think he'd have killed him, though he seems to have had more opportunity than any of us for doing so. Besides, he doesn't stand to gain by his death."

"Four hundred pounds in the second will."

"Yes, I'd forgotten that, but would he have known about it?"

"Where did Sir Herbert keep the will?"

"In the top drawer of the desk. I saw it there once when I was looking for some string."

"Unlocked?"

"Oh yes. Herbert was orderly—he could put his hand at once on anything—but he had an open careless nature and never locked up a thing."

"So that anyone in the household could have gained access to the will?"

"Yes, and I suppose four hundred pounds is a large sum to someone in Bancroft's position."

"Enough to set him up in his temperance bar."

Simon laughed with sudden wholehearted mirth.

"And how many temperance bars do you suppose have been set up on the proceeds of murder?" he inquired.

"An interesting speculation," Benedict said. "No, I am afraid it doesn't sound a very likely motive. So much for suspect No. 2—Bancroft. Suspect No. 3—Mrs. Bancroft—but really you know I don't think we need consider her except possibly as an accomplice of her husband."

"Oh lord, no! Not even an accomplice either. Bancroft would have too much sense to confide anything to such a hen of a woman—the police would have it out of her in no time. Who else now?"

"Gladys Hamshire."

"Oh, poor Gladys! A frustrated spinster certainly, but a murderess—no, she is not quite important enough for that. An interesting case though. I often think of writing an article on the secretary-employer relationship. About one thousandth per cent pull it off and marry the boss, and the unfortunate rest have to sublimate their feelings as best they can. And as sublimation doesn't come easily to any of us—if in fact it exists at all, which sometimes I doubt—a great deal of inner tension and explosion must go on. I think Herbert found her absolutely maddening at times, with all her jealous demands on his notice, but all the same she was

devoted to him and I can't see her killing him for a million pounds let alone for that paltry five hundred pounds she got under the second will. Of course, had it been Sonia, now that would have been a different thing altogether. By the way, you don't think we're on the wrong track? That Herbert's death was an unforeseen accident and that Sonia was the dedicated murderee?"

"A fascinating idea," Benedict said. "But the evidence doesn't seem to point that way. The murderer would surely have put the poison in the medicine which Lady Malynson takes with such care before each meal."

"I suppose you're right. We'd better stick to Herbert. What opportunity did Gladys have of putting poison in the sugar? She could, of course, have obtained it at any time from the lab, to which she had complete freedom of access."

"Yes, possession is no difficulty," Benedict agreed. "But opportunity is far more difficult to show. She seems to have run straight upstairs from Lady Malynson's sitting-room to her bedroom. Both you and Bancroft saw her leave the sitting-room and go upstairs, and Percy, who had just arrived in the corridor to mend the fuse, saw her run into her room. He had just heard the hall clock strike seven."

"Yes, that's right. I remember it was striking its loud deliberate stroke as she came running out of the sitting-room."

"So that disposes of the possibility that she didn't go to her room at once but lurked somewhere on the landing until you and Bancroft had left the hall."

"But afterwards?"

"Percy was outside her door the whole time until the gong went for dinner and swears she never left her room. I believe him to be speaking the truth."

"What about the window?"

"It has the glass roof of the greenhouse beneath. You'd have to be a fairly nimble athlete to manage that."

"And poor Gladys would have gone straight through the glass if she'd tried. She is the most awkward creature—always blundering into things. No, I think that lets her out. And now who are we left with?"

"X the unknown quantity. In this case the mysterious foreign lady."

"Oh, her. Well, honestly, you know the idea of a woman walking a mile through the lanes clutching a bag of poison on the off-chance of being able to pop it into Herbert's dinner doesn't seem to me very likely. No, I'm afraid it gets back to Sonia and me. And of the two I would infinitely prefer it to be Sonia."

"Unfortunately for you she has an unimpeachable alibi."

"I don't believe it—she's rigged it somehow. Didn't she go into the hall when that woman came? I thought I heard her calling to Herbert."

"Yes, but Bancroft was in the hall at the far end by the baize door."

"You bet he was—nothing that man misses."

"He saw Lady Malynson walk out into the porch——"

"Well, there you are. She could have walked out on to the gravel sweep and into the dining-room by the french window, as you so kindly suggested that I did just now—only much more shortly and easily."

"I don't think there was time. Bancroft says she was there less than a minute and that she came back into the hall, asked him where Miss Rose's cloak was and took it out of the cupboard and put it on the chair for her. Then she went back into the drawing-room."

"But she came out later."

"With Miss Rose, who saw her go straight into the study to join you. Then after that you were all together and you and Miss Rose finally left her in animated *tête-à-tête* with the vicar, who stayed until Bancroft rang the gong for

dinner. Then she and Sir Herbert went into the dining-room together."

"All very neat—every inch of the way guarded. I think her movements are just a bit too pat. Anyway, what's to have prevented her from introducing the poison into the chocolate after she got into the dining-room?"

"Bancroft was waiting at table. He didn't leave the dining-room until he had put the trifle in front of Sir Herbert and handed him the sugar."

"Well, I simply don't believe it. Bancroft's lying."

"Why should Bancroft lie? He doesn't like Lady Malynson."

"She's bribed him to tell that story. Why's he staying on? A week or so ago Sonia couldn't get rid of the Bancrofts quickly enough—she's always hated him for his surly independence and his obvious dislike of her—she must have people's approval, you know. And now she's full of charity, saying they are so devoted that she can't turn them out, and that they must stay until she can help them get set up in their temperance bar."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because Rose rang her up a little before lunch. Some friends of hers wanted a married couple and she thought the Bancrofts might like the job—and she rang up Sonia to find out. And then it was Sonia started this new line about the dear devoted Bancrofts. There's something very odd about it. And another thing: who could be sure that only Sir Herbert would help himself to sugar? Why, Sonia, of course, who carefully abstained from eating the trifle—made, by the way, from her own recipe and not sweet enough to Mrs. Bancroft's way of thinking. Anyone who ate it would be bound to add sugar. Oh, she's no fool, Sonia. She's rigged things very nicely for herself, and now she's trying to fasten the blame on me. And that's why I'm here now. I came to have a look at that diary. I wanted to see for myself

that extraordinary statement that Herbert is supposed to have made about having had a furious row with me."

"And that's just what I came to see too, sir," a voice said from behind him.

The enormous figure of Inspector Sussex blocked the doorway. Simon spun round from the desk, the diary clutched in his hand.

"Let me introduce Inspector Sussex—Mr. Simon Malynson," Benedict said.

"Good afternon, sir," the Inspector said, and stretched out his hand—not, it seemed, in greeting, but in quiet demand.

"Oh, good afternoon," Simon muttered, and handed him, rather like a somnambulist who is unconscious of his actions, the red leather diary.

"Thank you," the Inspector said. "Perhaps as you are here, sir, you wouldn't mind answering a few questions—just a matter of routine, you understand."

"Oh, of course, yes. Won't you sit down?" Simon said, and sank down into the nearest chair. His pale face looked moist. He took out a red silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Benedict quietly withdrew from the room.

CHAPTER VIII

BENEDICT went into Sonia Malynson's sitting-room. As he crossed the hall he could hear the sound of girlish laughter coming from the drawing-room; the rehearsal was in full swing and Sonia Malynson had presumably joined it again. He found her sitting-room empty. This exactly suited his purpose. He drew out his note-book and, with the help of a small glass, studied the marks he had copied from the blotting-paper in the study. Ché J t a me de ain, Mrs. H tt La Ro d Po D o. He looked thoughtfully at the letters and at the spaces which apparently divided them. Was it possible that Sir Herbert had been writing a love-letter in French? The first word might be, for instance, *Chérie*, and then *Je t'aime* and then perhaps some reference to a plan for the morrow, *demain*, and the last group might be the direction on the envelope, the lady's name, something Road, Pormouth, Devon. Or was this very far-fetched? Was it only his imagination shaping the words? Had they really no greater significance than a plan for a new women's branch of the British Legion?

Then another idea struck him. What had happened to the letter Sir Herbert had received the day before his death? Suppose that it had really come from his secret mistress, what would he have done with it? He might have destroyed it at once, of course. On the other hand sentiment might have constrained him to keep it. If so, where was it now? Certainly not among those dull and orderly array of papers in his desk. Presumably Lady Malynson would have come across it when she went through his things. Would she have destroyed it in the first white heat of passion or would some ulterior motive have made her keep it? He was already

moving towards her desk. If she had kept it, he might expect to find it there.

Lady Malynson did not share her husband's trusting nature. The desk was locked, so were the drawers beneath except for the two small top drawers which contained stocks of string, paper, Seccotine and garden labels. There was no sign here of what he had hoped to find. Evidently Lady Malynson left nothing to chance. He examined the lock of the desk. With a penknife he might force back the wards without doing any permanent damage to the lock. He took his penknife out of his pocket. It was a very special affair with several gadgets; he selected one slender, curved blade. Working swiftly, he forced back the wards and opened the flap. The contents lay neatly stacked in pigeon-holes: he ran through the bundles, postcards, note-paper, envelopes, a few notices, one or two invitations, a file of bills—ah yes, here a slight unevenness in the wood, a little knob, in fact; he pressed it and the floor of the pigeon-hole rose up, revealing a sheet of paper in the space beneath. He fished it out. It was a letter with the printed heading, Wargraves Detective Agency, Lancastria St., W.1; it was dated November 16th, 1949, and ran:

Dear Madam, we are in receipt of your letter of the 14th inst. and can assure you of our best attention. We have taken careful note of the details you require about Sir Herbert Malynson and we will write again as soon as we have a report——

A slight noise distracted Benedict, who always worked with part of his mind on the alert. He dropped the letter back into the secret hole, pressed the flap of the desk into place and moved out into the room. But the observant eye of Rose Malynson, who had just come in at the door, took in the situation at a glance.

"Please don't let me disturb you," she said, "if this is the only opportunity you have of rifling my sister-in-law's desk."

He was sensible of her ironic disapproval.

"I'm afraid I'm rather losing my touch," he said. "I should have heard you coming a moment earlier and have been discovered, as they say theatrically, smelling the chrysanthemums."

"Have they a smell?"

"Yes, faintly intellectual."

"Oh, I really came to look for Simon."

"He's with the police at the moment."

"The police!" An expression of alarm showed in her eyes, then she said in a casual voice, "I suppose they are taking statements from everyone?"

"Yes, Gladys Hamshire has already accused Lady Malynson of poisoning her husband and destroying the will."

"Oh, that," Rose said.

"You don't believe her?"

"No—no, I don't think so. But then, on the other hand, I haven't quite come round to the idea that anyone could have killed Herbert. I suppose there is no doubt?"

"I am afraid there is none now," Benedict said gently. "He died as the result of arsenic taken in the last meal he ate."

"Much?" she asked.

"About eight grains."

"I am afraid that means nothing to me. One likes to have the facts though—there is a certain comfort in facts. At least he didn't suffer pain." She paused and then said, looking directly at Benedict, "What do you think about it?"

"I am not sure of anything," Benedict said. "At the moment I am trying to trace some foreign woman in Sir Herbert's life."

"Oh!" Rose spoke sharply.

"You know something?"

"Perhaps. I'm not sure. Let's go somewhere where we can talk. This room makes thought and speech impossible. Where's Sonia?"

"Rehearsing in the drawing-room."

"Then let's go into the library. Easily the nicest room in the house anyway."

They sat in the shabby leather armchairs on each side of the fireplace.

"I think I owe you an apology," Rose said. "I was rather abrupt with you this morning. You see, I didn't know exactly who you were or what you were supposed to be doing. And the amateur detective has never been a favourite character of mine. But now Simon has told me about you—your wartime experience and so on—and—well, I realize I can trust you."

"I am glad of that."

"I have something to tell you. I haven't told anyone, not even Simon. I suppose I shall have to tell the police. And yet it probably has no bearing on Herbert's death." She paused and then went on with determined composure: "You see, I only saw him for a few minutes before his death. I owe it to Bancroft that I got there at all. I went straight up to him—Sonia was with Dr. Waller in the bedroom next door. Bancroft had put him on the single bed in his dressing-room. He was very weak. I thought at first he hadn't seen me. I knelt down by the bed and took his hand. And then he opened his eyes and said, 'Rose.' He pressed my hand, and then he muttered something I couldn't hear. I bent closer to him and all the words I could distinguish were 'look after her', then a pause, 'a good girl . . . Sonia mustn't know.' And then a much longer pause and finally one word in French, '*Pensé*'."

"And had you any idea what he was talking about?" Benedict said.

"None at all. I asked him: 'Who is it? What do you want me to do?' Something like that. I can't remember the exact words. His eyes quivered as if he had heard me. I thought he was going to answer and then he said, 'Water.' And I gave him a sip to drink from the cup at the bedside. But he couldn't swallow and it dribbled down his chin and then he sank into unconsciousness."

"I see. And have you been able to read any meaning into those words since?"

"No. I've thought a great deal about it, naturally. I felt he was quite sensible—that he was expressing a dying wish. I would have done anything in my power to carry it out, but I simply had no idea what he meant, except that he seemed to be commending someone—some woman—to my care and he didn't want Sonia to know."

"And he mentioned no name?"

"No."

"'*Pensé*'. You are sure it was that? Not a name—Pansy, for example?"

"Certainly not. My brother's French accent was impeccable."

"You must forgive me if I seem impertinent——"

"Did my brother have a mistress, you mean," Rose cut in. "Not to my knowledge."

"And would he have told you if he had?"

"Probably not, though he discussed most things with me."

"Suppose that there was a woman in his life, could she have lived locally?"

"Most improbable; indeed, impossible, I should say. My sister-in-law kept such a strict eye on his movements. He was only free on his trips to London."

"Ah yes, those trips to London. They provide a loophole. Do you think he loved his wife?"

"At one time, yes, certainly, and when love wore away

habits of loyalty and subservience remained—perhaps some affection, too."

A slight noise made her look up; a door opening, footsteps and girlish laughter in the hall.

"The rehearsal's breaking up," Benedict said.

"Oh." Her voice was without interest. "Do you suppose they will be much longer?"

Benedict understood her.

"I don't know. Routine questions often take a long time, you know. You are anxious about your cousin?"

"Frankly, yes. After all, someone killed my brother—you can't shut your eyes to that."

"You believe Simon Malynson capable of such a thing?"

"A few weeks ago I should have thought the very idea fantastic, but since then one's whole life seems to have undergone a landslide—there are no marks of certainty left. I'm living in a sort of nightmare of suspicion in which anything might be true. And the awkward thing is that Simon is the only one with a plausible motive."

"You attach no importance then to Gladys Hamshire's accusation against your sister-in-law?"

"Oh, Gladys? But then no one can take her seriously. She's so unbalanced—poor, insecure little creature, eaten up with frustration and jealousy."

"Jealousy is the very devil," Benedict said. "Like a raging toothache which never lets you alone."

"Yes, and I used to think myself free of it. Oh, the smug satisfaction of keeping oneself academically insulated from the common rub of life. Poor Gladys, I understand her feelings now."

She was silent for a little. Benedict glanced at her keenly. Pallor and strain gave her face a certain rather childlike beauty. Then he said, "Then you think Lady Malynson incapable of killing her husband?"

"For monetary gain, which seems the only motive, certainly."

"She loved him then?"

"Yes."

"Your cousin says that she loves only herself."

"Simon is prejudiced where Sonia is concerned. So am I if it comes to that, but I try to see things clearly. She loved him as far as she was capable of loving anyone—after all, there are almost as many different ways of loving as of dying. In a sense she was quite dependent on him; she would hardly hack away her one support in life."

"Not even in a sudden burst of violent jealousy?"

"Jealousy? Yes, perhaps."

"And they had no disagreement that you know of?"

"None beyond the ordinary friction of a very tight relationship."

"And why do you suppose that Lady Malynson consulted a private detective agency?"

"About my brother, you mean?"

"Yes, about a month before his death."

"I've no idea at all. Oh, but that reminds me. Yes, there was a quarrel between them. I'd forgotten about it with all that's happened since. It was when my brother first developed cardiac symptoms—about a month before his death, too. He had just come back from one of his trips to London. I was visiting the Court for tea. I let myself in at the front door, of course, and as I was crossing the hall I was aware of raised angry voices coming from Sonia's sitting-room, and then I saw Bancroft suddenly stepping back from the door, where he'd obviously been listening. I pretended not to notice, and I greeted him in a clear raised voice in order to give them a chance of hearing me. And the voices stopped. And then I went in and there was Herbert sitting in an armchair, looking rather blue and breathless. And Sonia was fussing over him and wanting to send for the doctor."

"And did she?"

"Oh yes. Dear old Dr. Waller came and diagnosed cardiac symptoms and advised rest and no more trips to London. He could always be relied on to give the most welcome advice."

"Welcome to your sister-in-law, you mean?"

"Of course. Herbert simply hated inactivity and a life which kept him even more tightly to Sonia's side."

"And you have no idea what they were quarrelling about?"

"No, they took care never to mention the subject to me—naturally I didn't probe."

"By the way, you are sure of Lady Malynson's movements when you were together on the evening of your brother's death?"

"If you mean by that did she have any opportunity of putting poison in the sugar basin, no, not while I was there anyway."

"You are sure?"

"Yes. Sonia came into the drawing-room with a glass of brandy for Gladys just as I arrived. And Gladys rushed out of the room as I told you, and Sonia and I stayed together talking. She left the room once when she heard the front door bell. She left the door open and I heard her speaking to Herbert, and I went to the door myself because I was rather wondering what had happened between Simon and Herbert. But as I got to the door Herbert disappeared into the cloakroom. Sonia was by the front door and she opened it and went out into the porch, and stood looking out into the garden, and then she came in again and I heard her speaking to Bancroft as I turned back into the drawing-room. Then she joined me again and a little later on we left the room together. She went into the study and I went upstairs to Gladys."

"You actually saw her go into the study?"

"Yes, and then I came downstairs and joined them in the hall, and Simon and I left, leaving Sonia talking with the vicar."

"Well, that's pretty conclusive," Benedict said, then his thoughts jumped to another point that had been worrying him. "By the way, when you left did you take your cloak with you?"

"My cloak?"

"Yes. I understand Lady Malynson had borrowed it for some theatricals and had put it out in the hall for you to take."

He could feel her instant withdrawal.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"Only because Bancroft says that he saw you in the dining-room, wearing the cloak, as he was on the point of serving dinner."

"He did nothing of the kind. I never went into the dining-room. And in any case, I'd left the house by then."

"I accept your assurance, of course. By the way, why are you so anxious about your cousin? He seems to have an incontestable alibi."

"Yes," Rose said, and with rel turned to the opening door. It was Sonia who came in, but even that didn't check Rose's eagerness.

"Sonia, how are you?" she said.

"Oh, what a day! What a terrible, terrible day!" Sonia cried, passing her hand over her forehead in a gesture of disgust and weariness. "The horrible sordidness of a police inquiry. Why do people think there is any excitement in crime, I wonder, any romance? The odious squalor of it! I feel quite contaminated, as if I must plunge myself into a deep hot bath with a double dose of those fern-scented bath salts."

"All the perfumes of Arabia," Rose murmured.

"What?"

"I was quoting Lady Macbeth."

"What an odd thing to do!"

The two women looked at each other. Then Rose stooped to pick up her handbag and gloves from the chair.

"I must be going," she said.

"I'm very glad to have seen you," Sonia said. "I was just about to ring you. I've had a letter by the second post from Professor Asherton, an old Cambridge friend of Herbert's, you know. He's very interested in the book and will try and look in here tomorrow on his way down to Cornwall and will take it with him to read on his holiday. I shall be glad to have his opinion. Such an expert, isn't he, on medieval history? And his brother-in-law, you know, is one of the partners in Mulready's. They would be excellent publishers, wouldn't they? Have you had time to look at it yourself yet?"

Lady Malynson looked at her sister-in-law keenly. Rose drew on her gloves.

"I've only had time to glance at it," she said. "You'd like it back I expect?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry. You see, the stupid thing is that I can't find the copy—although it was in the drawer of my desk. You know sometimes I almost think I am being spied on. The flap of my desk has marks on it almost as if someone had tried to tamper with the lock."

"How vexing!" Benedict said, annoyed that he had not been more skilful at his work.

Rose gave a half-glance in his direction, and then moved towards the door. "I'll let you have the typescript later on," she said. "By the way, how's Gladys?"

Sonia Malynson shrugged her shoulders in a way meant to indicate despair rather than indifference.

"Is there anything I can do?" Rose went on. "Would you like me to have her for the night?"

"Oh no, really, it's not worth it. I've no hard feelings,

you know. Fortunately I never bear a grudge. Poor thing, I'm sorry for her. And so stupid, too. It's a case, to alter the phrase slightly, of *qui accuse, s'accuse.* All her wild accusations have only turned the inquiry on to herself. After all, she had had that arsenic at hand in her bedroom."

"In her bedroom?" Rose said.

"Oh yes. Mrs. Bancroft saw her taking it from the lab the other day—some story about wanting to make a hat dye—if you can believe such a thing."

"Oh well, as far as that goes," Rose said, "we all had ample opportunity to help ourselves to the stuff."

"Dear Rose, always so to the point. By the way, I didn't mention to the Inspector anything about that quarrel you had with Herbert two days before his death."

Rose turned in the doorway. Her face was white and furious.

"I'll tell him all that's necessary myself," she said.

"I thought you would prefer that. I'm afraid he's still with Simon. What a long time they've been! Quite like third degree. I found it quite exhausting myself, although with an innocent conscience of course there's nothing to fear."

For answer Rose walked out, banging the door behind her.

"Poor Rose, she's so dreadfully worried about Simon," Sonia went on. "Of course, he never had any solid core to him, you know. Just a clever bobbing cork carried along on the tide of intellectual fashion. A rather sodden one now if the truth be known. Herbert was so anxious about it. He hoped she would marry a nice steady neighbour of ours who was much in love with her for a long time, but she would remain obstinately loyal to Simon. Oh dear, there's so much to arrange. This Pageant! We should have the dress rehearsal this evening in the Hall, but there's been some muddle. And the Oddfellows have got it instead—the Hall, I mean. And we shall have to do it in the hall here. I must

go and talk to Bancroft about it. There will be tea in my room at four-thirty. Perhaps we could have a little talk about things then. Oh, if only there wasn't so much to do . . ."

Benedict entirely agreed with this sentiment. All day long he had been hit by an accumulating mass of evidence, but instead of being content to sit down and sort it out, he was forced on by a feverish desire to find out who was the mysterious woman in Sir Herbert's life. He went into the hall and buttoned on his overcoat. He would go down to the Hawkinses at the lodge. There was just a chance that out of malevolent old Mrs. Hawkins he might get some revealing details.

As he crossed the hall he heard a bell pealing through the house. Through the glass panels of the front door he saw the frail stooping figure of a man; even before he had caught sight of the dog collar he knew it was the vicar. Benedict was glad. The vicar was a witness he very much wanted to meet.

"Ah, is Lady Malynson in?" the vicar said as Benedict opened the door. "I just came to inquire after her. I'm the vicar, you know."

"Yes, so do come in," Benedict said. "My name's Benedict Breeze. I'm Lady Malynson's solicitor."

"How do you do." The vicar's thin hand was surprisingly strong. He looked at Benedict from kind, sad eyes. "I'm very glad to think that Lady Malynson has you here to support her. This must be a terrible ordeal for her. So totally unexpected."

"Yes, though I understand there was a good deal of gossip."

"Oh, there always is in the country, you know. Or rather you don't perhaps. You come from London, I suppose. Yes, a good lot of gossip goes on, I'm afraid, about our neighbours. Yet they're a good lot of people at heart. And Sir Herbert was, of course, very popular. I still can't credit, you

know, that anyone could possibly have wanted to kill him. I suppose there is no doubt about it?"

"None at all, I am afraid."

"What terrible days we are living in! And poison, too. I never can quite understand poisoning—it seems so horribly deliberate."

"And difficult to pin down. I suppose you have known Sir Herbert for a long time?"

"Off and on for twenty years—he was in India for part of that time. A very successful career out there. But of course in the end he had to come back to his old home. He was very happy here, I think. Of course, he had a happy nature. Most cordial to me always and a great support in the parish. Lady Malynson, too, is very civil. But I think women have more complicated natures than men."

"I believe you were here on the night Sir Herbert died?"

"Yes, indeed. I looked in for a few minutes with a copy of the parish magazine. I was on my way back from a meeting at Pontefoy—that's the next hamlet but it's part of this parish. Rose and Simon were just leaving as I arrived, but Lady Malynson and Sir Herbert were in the hall. I was struck by how tired he looked. He was his usual cordial self though and wanted me to come in for a drink. I refused because I was in a hurry to get back for a programme on the wireless. Do you know the series? 'Does Religion Make Sense?' Most interesting. I think they must do a lot of good. On the Home at eight on Wednesdays. Well, then Sir Herbert went back to his study and Lady Malynson and I quickly settled the details for the next meeting of the Mothers' Union. And then I got into my car and drove off, and I got back just as the programme was starting. And that was the last time I saw Sir Herbert."

"Do you know what time you left?"

"Bancroft was just knocking on the gong for dinner, I remember. And I said to Lady Malynson as I left, 'Well,

bon appetit.' I'd just come back, you see, from a holiday in the South of France. They were always saying that there. So polite. Though really the sanitation, or rather the lack of it, in some of those villages—but there, it's foolish to judge by American standards, as I kept telling my brother-in-law. I've always liked the French, you know. Such an unexpected treat—paid for by my wife's brother over from South Africa. The last time I shall go abroad now."

"Sir Herbert was fond of travel, too, I believe."

"Oh yes, he loved foreign parts. He was a good linguist. And quite a scholar in his way. He really did a great deal of reading, you know, for this book of his. He was at heart a truly religious man. St. Augustine and Pascal, those two champions of Christendom, were the authors he was never tired of reading. Oh, if only more people read them instead of all those magazines and cheap novels, to say nothing of the films. Oh, here is Lady Malynson. Good evening. I've just come to inquire for you."

Benedict slipped out of the front door, leaving the vicar to greet Lady Malynson, who had appeared with Bancroft from behind the baize door. He walked fast. Already the light was going; a low greyness was creeping over the fields, though whether this was mist or darkening sky one couldn't tell, for air and sky appeared as one. Thoughts went racing through his mind, or rather he was racing after them. Something the vicar had said had momentarily lighted a spark in his own mind. Now what on earth was it? Travel, gossip, religion. Then the association of ideas clicked in his brain. He stopped dead in his walk. An extraordinary idea had occurred to him. He turned round and ran back towards the house. His footsteps pounded in his ears and seemed to add to the cry of 'Can it be true? Can it be true?' As he mounted the steps to the porch his breath and excitement abated. Of course it couldn't be true. There could be nothing in it, only a random association of ideas. But he hurried on across the

hall and threw open the door of the study. He stood panting inside. His glance turned at once to the desk. Yes, there in the bookslide on top of the desk among all the handy reference books was the fat leather volume entitled in gold letters, *Pascal's Pensées*. "He always kept it there," Lady Malynson had explained. "He said that Pascal had preserved his faith in God." Now Benedict recalled Sir Herbert's dying words: "Look after her—a good girl—Sonia mustn't know—*Pensé*." Add an 'es' and might the word not be *Pensées—Pascal's Pensées*? Had Sir Herbert been trying to give his sister some directions?

Benedict took down the volume. Certainly Sir Herbert had read it; there were pencilled notes in the wide margins and occasional passages had been underlined. Benedict turned over the handsomely printed pages until he came to the marbled paper lining of the thick back cover. He tapped the lining. It sounded hollow. He explored with his finger over the smooth surface of the red and yellow marbling; ah yes, here against the inner margin was a tiny metal button; he pressed it and the marbled lining, a thick piece of cardboard, flew up, revealing a space between itself and the outer leather cover. Benedict slipped his fingers into the cavity and met a confused pack of papers. He drew them out and a pile of letters lay before him. They were all written in French and in the same thin sprawling handwriting with the foreign crossed 's'. They covered a period of some ten years; they were all brief, the earlier ones passionate, the later ones quieter in tone. Benedict felt the impertinence of intruding on this secret intimacy; he averted his gaze from the body of the letters and studied only the headings. But on none of them was there a full address; sometimes London, once or twice Ealing, and several times 15 R.H.G. And here the very letter he had been looking for, written on rose-pink paper, dated simply 'Monday' and the address at the top 'Pormouth'. *Chéri* (he read, and quickly translated the re-

maining six lines). *I am here with Polly. I have been ill. I must see you. How are you? Why didn't you write? You know how anxiously I wait for news. Polly is going out tomorrow. I will come over in the early evening to see you—it will be safe as your wife is away. If only I could see you I shall feel happy. All my love. Henriette.*

Sir Herbert read Pascal and kept his mistress's love letters in the cover of *Pensées*. It was curious. Benedict put the letters back in their secret hiding-place. The pages turned back of their own accord: for a moment he stared down at two passages which were underlined. "We seek happiness and only find misery and death." "If man is not made for God, why is he only happy in God?" Benedict shut the book and put it back on the shelf. At last he felt he knew the dead man.

CHAPTER IX

BENEDICT sat very upright on a flat red cushion which padded the seat of the old-fashioned, high-backed settle that stood at right angles to the fireplace. He was looking into the malignant face of Mrs. Hawkins, who leant towards him, spitting her words into his eyes. Her gentle old husband sat on an upright chair between them, his gnarled hands resting on his knees. He took no part in the conversation beyond saying "Don't take on so now" in a quiet, rather hopeless voice whenever Mrs. Hawkins became particularly excitable. Percy was out. He had gone to the cinema in Pormouth. Benedict didn't regret his absence. It would have been impossible to listen to anyone besides Mrs. Hawkins. Her language flowed on in a monotonous stream of abuse. With the single exception of Sir Herbert, who had apparently been quite faultless, there was no one's reputation at the Court, and in the village too, that she didn't blacken, and her worst accusations were levelled at Sonia Malynson. With difficulty Benedict got away from her imperfections, which seemed to cover the whole range of human vice, and turned the conversation to the events of the day of Sir Herbert's death.

"Did any car come up the avenue during the evening?" he asked.

"No, not till the vicar came—he stopped to leave the parish magazine. Always in a hurry. Never time for a word. Just 'Good evening, Mrs. Hawkins. How are you? I can't stop,' and then off he goes. And then after that there wasn't no one till Dr. Parkin came. Ever so impatient, blowing on his horn as if he expected me or Mr. Hawkins to open the gate to him."

"I'd have opened the gate quick enough if I'd known what he'd come for," Hawkins said.

"Of course 'ee would, but how was us to know that Sir Herbert had been took queer? I see'd him only that very afternoon. He was walking back from a meeting in the village, see. And he stopped to have a word with me. Always very affable. A proper gentleman. And so good to Percy. He thought a lot of Percy. Not like some I could name——"

"Then you are sure no car came up the avenue earlier in the evening, a little before the vicar came?"

"No. This room fronts the road, see. I hears every car that comes, screaming on the brakes as like as not as it turns in from the road. Nothing don't escape my notice, I can tell you that."

Benedict didn't doubt it. He was disappointed. How had the mysterious Henriette arrived at the Court? On foot? But Pormouth was five miles away and he had discovered that there was no bus between two in the afternoon and eight at night. Then Hawkins said in his slow soft Devon voice, "Do 'ee mind, Liz, the car that stopped down the road?"

"You mean outside here?" Benedict said.

"That's right, sir."

"Oh, down the road. That's a different thing," Mrs. Hawkins said. "The gentleman asked if a car had come in at the gate. Yes, a car stopped just a little ways down the road."

"What time was this?"

"Us had just finished our bit of supper—Percy was late in that night from work. Just after seven I suppose it was. I heard a car stop, but I didn't take much notice. Too much to do without troubling my head about other folks' affairs. I'm not one to poke my nose into what's no concern of mine. I heard the gate open—the side footgate, that is—it squeaks like a pig being killed. And I went to the window to pull the

curtains across, see—Mr. Hawkins never draws them tight—always leaves a gap. And I looked out just for a minute. A proper moonlight night it was too, and I sees a car just a little ways down the road pulled into the hedge. And there was a young chap bending over the engine, doing something to it. And I said to Mr. Hawkins, I said, 'Why, that's young Fred. Didn't I, Dad?"

"Yes, that's right," Hawkins said.

"That's my sister's boy—the one that lives over at Pormouth. Her husband has a big garage business—Forest Hill Garage is the name. Only he died a year back. Always one for pubs, see. Blew his brains out on Christmas Eve in the back of the new car 'e'd just bought. Spoilt it really."

"And did you go out and speak to your nephew?"

"No, I don't have nothing to do with them. My sister's proper high. Thinks we ain't good enough for her. And I'm not one to push in where I'm not wanted. I sent a wreath though. Thirty shillings it cost—only Mr. Hawkins got it cheap. But never so much as a word of thanks did I get——"

"And how long did the car stay there?"

"Oh, I couldn't say, I'm sure. About half an hour or more. I heard the side gate go again, then the car started up. He turned in the gateway—some people have a nerve——"

There was a knock at the door and Hawkins got up.

"If that's the baker, a milk loaf and none of they buns neither. Disgusting what they tries to sell you these days. Changed my baker six times and still I can't get a bun that's fit to eat. This chap comes all the way from Pormouth——"

"Pormouth!" Benedict exclaimed, and with hurried apologies he rushed after Hawkins to the front door.

The baker proved to be on his way back and agreed at once to give Benedict a lift into Pormouth. "Don't have much custom this way," he said, as they drove off. "Not worth coming, that's my opinion. But the boss thinks different. He'd use a gallon of petrol to sell six pen'th of buns."

The baker set Benedict down near the Forest Gate Garage. Fred emerged, grinning, from under the body of a car. He had an open unsuspicious nature and he gladly gave Benedict the details of his trip to Izard St. Petroch. He had been hired by a foreign lady whose name he couldn't remember; it was something quite English like White, only it wasn't White. He had fetched her from 40 Laburnam Road, Pormouth, and had taken her to the Court; she had asked him to stop outside the avenue and she had gone up on foot. He had fiddled about a bit with the carburettor, which was choked, and read the newspaper, and then about three-quarters of an hour later she returned and he drove her back to Pormouth.

Benedict thanked him and hurried off to Laburnam Road, which ran up at right angles from the sea front. It was a street of red Victorian villas, built in pairs, each with a balcony and gable. No. 40 had a straggling privet hedge and a clump of roses, suckering riotously, in the middle of a depressed piece of grass. Thick lace curtains guarded the windows and an old brass plate on the door bore the words 'No hawkers, no circulars'. On the whole it seemed an unlikely place to find this mysterious Henriette. But presumably she didn't live here. It was the house of her cousin Polly, she had said in the letter. And it was unlikely that she was still staying here. The most Benedict could hope for would be to secure her permanent address. He rang the bell, and before he could compose his features to meet and disarm the gentle suspicions of Cousin Polly the door opened and a woman in outdoor things came out. She stopped on seeing Benedict, who took in a quick impression of a fat, middle-aged woman, clearly foreign and probably French, dressed in a short black fur coat, a tight black dress with a tartan scarf of taffeta arranged in a wide bow at her neck and fastened by a diamond brooch shaped like a spray of ferns. She wore a small black hat with a feather, a bunch of white flowers and a veil.

"All cluttered up with a veil and a lot of flowers stuck round." Benedict recalled Bancroft's words. She was brightly made up with great patches of rouge dabbed on her cheeks, and a strong wave of violets wafted from her as if she had drenched herself with scent before setting out. She stared uncertainly at Benedict, who instinctively decided on a direct approach.

"Good afternoon. My name is Benedict Breeze. I come on behalf of Miss Malynson," he said, speaking rapidly in French.

She gave a startled cry and all the blood drained away from her face, leaving the two patches of rouge on her cheeks like rough islands of colour. Her hand moved to her throat and then, as if for support, to the jamb of the door.

"From Miss Malynson?" she said. "How did she know?"

"Sir Herbert spoke of you to her just before his death. She has been anxious to get in touch with you ever since, but we didn't know your address or indeed your name."

"Oh, oh." One or two sobs burst from her and her tightly corseted body heaved with emotion. "Oh, forgive me, you startled me. Come in, please. Polly—my cousin—is out. We shan't be interrupted for a little while at any rate."

He followed her into the drawing-room. It was a small square room; on the table in the bay window was a fern in a huge mustard-coloured pot. The fire shone brightly on an array of brass fenders, scuttles, fire-irons and on the leatherette seats which flanked each side of the fender. Above the fireplace was an ornate overmantel, fretted with little niches which were filled with high-necked china vases in pastel shades of blue and pink and daubed for no particular reason with golden garlands.

Henriette sank heavily into an armchair. She was crying without restraint now and her tight ball of a handkerchief was quite inadequate to hold back her tears.

Benedict sat opposite, waiting. She had taken off her hat

and he could see a profusion of thick orange hair, a little more golden towards the tips where the dye still held. Her long fat cheeks were streaked now with dark marks of tears, powder and rouge. A clutter of bracelets jingled on her wrists. Then with an effort she seemed to compose herself.

"Oh, forgive me—it was such a shock."

"Of course—I understand," he said, offering her his clean pocket handkerchief. "It is for me to apologize. I should have explained to you more gently."

"Oh, as for that, what hurts, hurts." She pressed his handkerchief to her eyes. "You can't escape that. Oh, *mon Dieu*!" She had felt for her handbag and taken out the mirror. "What a sight! Forgive me. Thank goodness for cosmetics. Those poor Victorian English women. My husband's mother and sisters were like that, you know. Never so much as a grain of powder or a touch of lipstick—never, not even when their lips were blue with cold and their noses the colour of a thistle. No thought for others. There, that's better. Now I can listen to you."

She spoke in French with a determined effort at vivacity in an ugly high-pitched voice and in an accent which blunted the vowel sounds.

"Do you come from Toulon, madame?" Benedict said, recognizing the accent.

"Yes. Do you know it? My old home is just a little way outside towards Montieux-le-Vieux."

"I was there during the war at one time."

"The war? I see. You were one of our gallant allies. Did you have something to do with the Maquis then? You speak excellent French. So did Herbert. Much better than mine, I used to tell him. Oh yes, such lovely classical French. It was a joy to hear him. No one talks like that now. It's quite a joke. People would stare at you—but of course in a foreigner it's very nice. So Miss Malynson sent you to me?" Her tone changed; she was slightly on her guard now.

"Yes, in a spirit of friendship, I can assure you."

"Ah, that was kind; very kind and nice. I do not know her, of course, and yet I feel I know her almost as well as if she were my own sister. Herbert was devoted to her—he was always talking about her. He said that she had such a generous nature and he longed for her to marry some really nice man—and not to go on and on with her cousin."

"He didn't approve of Simon?"

"He liked him very much—he said he was such amusing company—Herbert couldn't stand being bored, you know, though he had such beautiful manners that he used to endure people like an early Christian martyr. But he didn't think he was good enough for Rose. As if, as I said, a woman ever married a man because he was good enough for her. Good, bad or indifferent, what does it matter when you're in love?"

"But afterwards?"

"Afterwards, yes; but then you have to put up with it. No going back on a bad bargain. I married when I was twenty. I met my husband—Frank Grey—when he came to Toulon on a business trip. Some friends introduced us. And we were married not long after. Oh, those first years in London. I nearly died of it. Not that my husband wasn't always kind, but he was out all day and I knew no one in London. And his family weren't at all friendly. They never liked the marriage. A foreigner and a Roman Catholic. Not that they ever went to church themselves, as far as I could see. But they were so insular. And then the dirt, and smoke, and no sun. No sun above all. In my old home it was often cold, but there was always sun. That's what I've never got used to all the twenty-five years I've been in England. It killed my husband in the end. He'd always suffered from chest trouble and that winter of thick fogs two years before the war was too much for him. I begged him to come down to my home in the South—but he wouldn't hear of it. A real cockney. He was never happy out of London. Just a trip to Brighton in the

summer, that was all. Once he came to France with me, but he never really liked it. "It's all right," was all he ever said, and he couldn't wait till he sat down to his tea and fried egg and bacon on the boat back. Ah well, the good English fogs were too much for him in the end. He simply couldn't breathe. The doctors had a long name for it. But it was just that there was no air; he was suffocated by the fog. He was quite young. Only in his early fifties."

She was silent a moment.

"And you stayed on alone in London?"

"Oh, I meant to go back to France—my parents were still alive then."

"And you didn't?"

"No; you see I met Herbert instead. I had gone to the West End to put my little house in the hands of a house agent and I went on to see an exhibition of French pictures. I've always liked painting. But my husband never looked at a picture if he could help it—it was always football or dog-racing with him. And it so happened that there was a shortage of programmes and the gentleman just in front of me at the counter got the last one. And then he offered to give it me, and I refused it just as graciously, and in the end we both shared it. And then after the exhibition we went to have tea together. That was how it all began. And then we used to meet whenever he came to London to collect material for his book.

"He had to be careful of course. His wife is a very jealous woman. Sometimes we met and we went to a restaurant, but I liked it best when he came to my little place at Ealing. It wasn't what he was used to, of course, but he always said it was like home to him. Of course, I've always known how to make a man comfortable. Oh, the delicious little lunches we used to have there. I'm a good cook, though I say it myself. But then, French women care about these things. My poor husband. It was terrible cooking for him.

Fish and chips was what he really liked and those terrible sauces out of bottles. But Herbert was a true gourmet; he appreciated the subtleties of good cooking.

"Of course it was quite simple what we had. A little table spread with a bright check cloth, and drawn to the fire in winter and out on the little brick terrace under the vine in summer, and fresh French rolls, and a bottle of wine always. My brother-in-law used to bring me the wine on his business trips—he's in the wine trade. Then after the meal was over he would sit over his *café noir* and smoke a cigar. I've always loved the smell of a cigar ever since. And I would sit and do my mending while he made notes about his book, and sometimes he would tell me about it. He was very intelligent. It was always very interesting listening to him."

"He really cared about his writing then?"

"Oh yes, very much. You think perhaps it was a funny subject for a man like him to choose. Such a *bon viveur*. Why should he care about all those old monasteries and things? But, you know, there was another side to his nature. He was at bottom serious. He was a religious man in his way. He used to say that only those who had renounced the world—the saints and mystics—knew true happiness.

"Oh well, I don't know anything about that. I'm a creature of the senses, you know. I like what I can see and touch and feel. Still, I was brought up in a convent in France. I could understand a little of what he was getting at. Those nuns were very kind—oh, some were rather soured and severe. Who can blame them? Such hard lives. Sister Thérèse was my special one. I used to go back and see her. She always prayed for me. I had need of her prayers. She's dead now. Starvation during the war. She gave all her food to the children. Those *sales Boches*. She used to pray for them too, I believe. But that was going too far. Is that book finished now?"

"Yes, Lady Malynson has just finished revising it and hopes to get it published soon."

"And so she got hold of the book in the end. I wonder if it makes her happy."

Benedict stared at her. "I don't quite understand. Didn't they plan the book together? Wasn't it a sort of joint enterprise?"

"Oh no. What an idea! Herbert began writing it, I think, because he wanted to have something to himself—something apart from his wife. But, of course, she tried to monopolize his writing, just as she tried to monopolize everything else. Poor man, what he used to suffer between all those women. He used to say that the only peace he knew was with me."

"You mean from his wife and Miss Hamshire?"

"Oh yes, they were both so jealous, making such demands on him. I told him again and again to sack that secretary. But, of course, he was too kind. And she was useful, too, typing all his manuscript, and she really understood the work and helped him a lot. And then his sister, though he loved her so much, sometimes made trouble. She has very high principles and she disapproved of his business enterprises—she thought they were dishonest speculation. In a way she was right. But, poor man, he had to have money. How was he to live otherwise in the style which pleased his wife, and which he enjoyed too if it comes to that? And then one of his things, the Blue Coral Amalgamated, went smash; he'd got his own money out in time, but he was afraid of other people being ruined. And I said if he wasn't ruined it was all right. But he couldn't see it like that. I really don't think he was well. He got palpitations. I begged him to see a doctor, but he wouldn't listen. And then, of course, that terrible day came when she found out——"

"Lady Malynson?"

"Yes; and all those years we'd been so discreet. You

mustn't upset a man's marriage. I've always held that. After all, she was his wife. She had her rights. And I used to write to him at his club so that she shouldn't get suspicious of letters coming to the house. And then in November—November 10th to be exact—he said he wanted to give me a treat. It was the eleventh anniversary of our first meeting. And he gave me a wonderful dinner at *Chez François* and took a box for me at the Opera. I'm very fond of the Opera—nothing depressing, you know. I like something gay and colourful. It was the *Marriage of Figaro*. Marvellous! And then as we were coming out and getting into a taxi, he suddenly caught my arm. He was shaking all over. I thought he'd been taken ill. "My God," he said, "that was Sonia." Well, I tried to say that she hadn't seen us, but he said he had caught her full gaze. He took me back to Ealing and then fled back to his club. That was the last time I saw him."

"Except on the day he died?"

"Yes, except then. Oh, I can't tell you what it was like. I was in such a state of nerves. The next day I got a letter from him to say that his wife had seen us and he'd tried to make up some story, but she hadn't believed him. By some awful chance she had come up to London on her way to a sick aunt at Aberdeen and while she was waiting for the night train she'd looked in at the Opera. And he begged me not to write—and said we couldn't meet again at least for a long time and that he wasn't well and the doctor had ordered him to rest. I was frantic. I kept imagining things. And then I caught 'flu and I can't tell you what a state I was in. Depression. Suicide. Oh, monsieur, I don't know why I'm alive now. And then never a word! And worry about him. I got into a frantic state thinking if only I could see him just once it would be all right. And then, of course, I thought of Cousin Polly—my husband's cousin, the only one of the family who's ever been nice to me. So nice, and so dull. I never went to stay with her, I'm afraid, though she often

asked me. Partly because I didn't want to embarrass Herbert by being so near. But now I thought I would go. I needed a change anyway. You can't get well in the fog of London. And, of course, once I was there I kept thinking of him only five miles away and wondering how I could see him—just once more without exciting his wife's suspicions. And then I read in the local paper—that *Devon Messenger*—oh, so dull, but I used to read it, hoping to get some news of Herbert in it. Well, I read that Lady Malynson had not been able to open some meeting or other because she had been called away to the deathbed of her old aunt in Aberdeen. And now I thought this was my chance. I could slip over and see Herbert. Frankly, I'd always wanted to see his home. Oh, it's nice, you know, to picture someone you love in their daily surroundings. And I wrote to Herbert saying I would come over on the Wednesday evening. Polly would be out then and I didn't want her to know anything. I'd never so much as mentioned Herbert's name to her. You can't be too careful. And I took a car over. I told the driver to wait outside in the road. I thought it better not to be too obtrusive. And I walked up. Oh dear, what a long walk! All that rough gravel and in high-heeled shoes, too. Herbert had often described it to me, but somehow I hadn't expected it to be so far. But it was a lovely mild night with a moon. And then when I got to the house my heart was beating quite fast. To be at his house at last—it seemed so strange. I rang the bell and it was Bancroft who answered it. I had expected Herbert. Oh, it was absurd of me. But somehow I had supposed that he would be sitting waiting for me, just as I used to sit and wait for him at Ealing, thinking of nothing else but his coming. And then I felt rather shy and I waited just inside the front door. And then Herbert came hurrying out to me and I could tell at once that he was very upset. He seized me by the hands and pushed me towards the door. 'My God,' he whispered, 'why have you come? Didn't you get my

letter? My wife's here. You must go at once.' And I was so disappointed that I was quite unreasonable, quite hysterical. I kept saying, 'But I must see you, I must see you—just for a minute.' And then he said: 'All right, I'll try and slip out to you. Go round to the back of the house by the study. But you must go now.' And he pushed me out of the door almost with violence. Oh, I was so bitterly hurt."

"Sir Herbert was in a very difficult position because his wife had heard you coming and had come out into the hall to see what was happening."

"Oh yes, I know—I mean, I know it was difficult for him. I got his letter next day, telling me not to come—the posts here are so bad. And then the day after that in the *Devon Messenger* I read of his death—heart trouble, they said. Oh, it was such a terrible shock. And I thought perhaps my visit had upset him, had helped to bring on a heart attack. I can't tell you what it was like. To be alone with Polly and not able to tell a soul about it. I think I'd caught a chill that night. And I wasn't fully recovered from the influenza. And I was in bed for a long time with bronchitis and pneumonia, the doctor said—I think myself it was just unhappiness. I wished I could die. I had no desire to live. And Polly was so good looking after me. Really, she's an angel. I'm sorry about the unkind thoughts I've had about her. After all, cleverness isn't everything. It's the heart which really counts."

"You are better now, I hope?"

"Oh yes, yes, thank you. I'm going back to London tomorrow."

"May I have your address? I know Miss Malynson will want to get in touch with you herself."

"4 Rolan Hill Walk, Ealing. I shall be glad to see her. I'm going back to France later on."

"I am glad of that."

"Yes, in many ways life is easier here, but after all it is

my own country and my brother and sister-in-law are still there. Tell me, Mr. Breeze, did he suffer very much?"

Benedict gave her a penetrating look. Clearly she didn't know. The facts would be in the next week's *Devon Messenger*.

"No. I understand he suffered almost no pain."

"Oh, I'm so glad—so glad—but there is something else, yes?"

She looked at Benedict as if sensing something from the gravity of his manner.

"Yes, I am afraid this will be a great shock to you. You see, Sir Herbert did not die of a heart attack. He was poisoned."

"Poisoned? Oh, my God! You mean—oh no, it can't be that—that he took his own life. That is impossible."

"No, there is no evidence to suggest suicide. He was poisoned by arsenic contained in the sugar he ate during dinner that night."

"Arsenic! You mean he was murdered? Oh, my God!"

"Yes, but I can assure you that he suffered no pain."

"Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet."

"It was his wife."

"What do you mean?"

"She was so jealous. And then my coming. She guessed who I was and she thought we were still in touch with each other, and she poisoned him."

"She seems to have had no opportunity of administering the poison."

"Oh, then who—who could have done it? Herbert poisoned—murdered—oh no, no, no!" and she began sobbing. "He was kind—so kind."

Benedict let her cry a little and then he said gently: "I am sorry to intrude on you at such a moment. I will go at

once if you wish. But I have been asked to make an independent inquiry into the death of Sir Herbert and I should be glad if you feel able to give me a few details."

She looked up at him, her eyes swollen with tears, but this time she made no attempt to remove the traces of her grief.

"Oh yes, yes, of course, if there is any way I can help. What do you want to know?"

"Did you go away as soon as you left the house?"

"No, because I thought he meant to slip out and meet me. I went round to the back as he told me. I expected him to come out as soon as the coast was clear, but I see now he only said that to get rid of me. I sat on a seat encased in a sort of yew bush. I thought no one would see me there. I could see the study window and there was a light showing through the curtain. I knew which one it was because I had counted the windows down—Herbert had always said the study window was the fourth from the left—the right as you faced it. It was a mild night, but I got chilled waiting. And then I heard voices and a man and a woman came round the corner of the house, and they came along the path towards me and then they cut across the lawns and out of my sight. It was moonlight and I recognized them—Rose and Simon Malynson. Herbert had described them to me often and I had seen photographs. And then it began to rain, but I was sheltered by the yew bush. And then I heard running footsteps and I saw the man coming back again."

"Back again? You are sure?"

"Yes, and he passed along the path and round the corner to the front of the house. I didn't see him after that, of course. It was raining hard now. And I was getting wet. And I knew it was useless to wait any longer. And I walked along the path to a little tool-shed which stood among some bushes. It was open and I sheltered there until the worst was over, and then I went back down that long drive to the

car. Oh, it was terrible. I was quite worn out and wet and miserable."

"And you saw no one else?"

"No."

"And did the man come back again?"

"He may have done. I couldn't see anything in the shed. And all the time I was thinking about Herbert. Thinking that he didn't care—wishing that I had never come."

"You mustn't think that he didn't care," Benedict said gently. "When he was dying he spoke of you to his sister—he commended you to her care."

"That is the truth? He really did that?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I am so happy—so happy that you told me that. Oh dear, there's Polly coming back."

Benedict, too, had heard the latch of the gate. He got up.

"I must be going. Many, many thanks for your help. I am afraid I have kept you from going out."

"Oh no, I was just going down to the church, that was all. I can go later on. I was never one for religion, you know. But now, well, perhaps the nuns were right. I wish I could have helped you more."

"On the contrary," Benedict replied, "you have told me exactly what I wanted to know."

CHAPTER X

BENEDICT got a lift back to Izard St. Petroch. The car set him down at the green and he continued on foot. As he was climbing the hill out of the village he saw through a gateway a spur of distant cliff, surmounted by a tiny rectangular building which looked as if it had been built out of a children's box of bricks. That must be the old chapel of St. Blaize which Lady Malynson had spoken of, he supposed, and, acting on an impulse, he vaulted over the gate and cut across the rough open pastureland. The moon was up and as he climbed the great bosom of hill he could look back on the village, cupped below, and see the steady tower of the church rising out of the shadow of trees and houses. Only in moonlight did you know what stillness was, he thought; it acquired another quality, almost as dynamic in its way as motion. He looked up at the dun-coloured ground rising above his head, the chapel momentarily hidden by a fold of ground; soon he should strike the path at the top of the cliffs and after a brief visit to the chapel he would go on to Start Cottage. His next task was to see Rose Malynson.

Now he met a sharp air; soon a strong wind was humming past his ears and he could feel the sting of salt on his face. From the distance came the thud of waves. Then quite suddenly the sound embraced him; he braked on his heels and stood looking down at a jagged fall of rock to the sea churning in white foam far below. He had unexpectedly reached the summit of the cliff and had all but stepped into space at a point where erosion had carried away the outer edges of the path.

To his left, shining in the moonlight like some inaccessible fairy palace, was the chapel. He turned to walk

up the hill towards it; then he saw some movement break the wall facing him; a figure had just come out of the door. Now he saw a woman running down the path at the uneven speed of one who is trying to keep pace with a disturbing surge of thoughts. As she came near him she stumbled on an uneven piece of ground; she swayed and seemed about to topple over the edge of the cliff. Benedict sprang forward and, catching her by the arm, steadied her. She turned towards him a startled face, pale and elongated in the moonlight. It was Rose Malynson.

"Thank you," she gasped. "I nearly went over. Death seemed quite easy then. Perhaps it won't be so bad when it comes."

"You've been to the chapel?"

"Oh yes. Rather absurd really when you're an unbeliever. I actually found myself praying. Strange, isn't it?"

"I don't find it strange at all," Benedict said.

"Oh yes, of course, I forgot. Simon said you were a Roman Catholic. I haven't any faith, but when I'm in a jam I'm inclined to believe in God. Escape, I suppose."

"Or facing reality perhaps."

"Reality? I wonder." She was silent a moment. "Where have you been?"

"To see the mysterious Henriette."

"Who? Oh, of course, the foreign woman. Do you mean to say you've found her?"

"Yes, staying at Pormouth."

"How very odd! What's she like?"

"Not what you'd expect, I think. But she's nice—natural, warm and unselfish."

"I must go and see her." But Rose spoke a little absently, as if something else engaged her thoughts. "You haven't seen Simon then?"

"No. Is he missing?"

"Yes. Sonia says they've arrested him."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I'm sure of nothing. I went back to the cottage, you know, after I left you this afternoon to wait for him. I started to read Herbert's book——"

"What's it like, by the way?"

She seemed a little taken aback at the question. "Oh, oddly enough, it's rather good."

"That surprises you?"

"Yes, frankly it does. I never took the *magnum opus* seriously. Herbert was no scholar, you know, but really, I underrated his ability, and even Sonia doesn't seem to have spoilt it in any way. Of course, I know little about the subject. Modern social history is my line, but it certainly struck me as a readable and scholarly work, though I only had time to skim through it. And still Simon didn't come. So I thought I would go up to the Court and find out what had happened. And I took the typescript with me because Sonia wanted it back again, as you know. But there was no sign of Simon there either. And Sonia said that he'd been arrested."

"Did she really know?"

"I don't know. She might have been making it up out of malice, of course. I dare say it's what she wants. I went back to the cottage and rang up the police, but I couldn't get anything out of them. And then I came up here. It's rather a favourite walk of Simon's—particularly at night."

"Rather a dangerous one too."

"Not really, if you know it. The path is quite well marked except for this last bit—there was a fall of rock a month or two back, which carried away the edge of the cliff." They were walking along rapidly now as if they both had some secret object to achieve. For a little they were silent. Rose seemed occupied with her own speculations. Then she said without slackening pace: "Mr. Breeze, please

tell me honestly, do you think the police could have arrested Simon? Surely there isn't enough evidence for that?"

"That depends," Benedict said, turning his gaze from the moonlit horizon of sea and sky. "For instance, do the police know that he left you and went back to the house?"

She looked at him, startled. "How did you know that?"

"Henriette told me—she was watching outside."

"I see. Oh, it was wrong not to have told the truth in the first place, but Simon begged me not to say anything."

"Why?"

"Oh, I know it looks suspicious. I told him it would be better to be open about everything, but he was in such a state of worry when he heard about the exhumation—he said suspicion was bound to fall upon him and—well, in short, I gave him my word that I would say nothing about his having left me and gone back to the house."

"What happened exactly?"

"It was such an innocent trifle and yet I can see how it could be construed as part of a deliberate planned attempt at murder. As you know, Simon and I left the house together a little before eight o'clock. It was a very mild night for December and he wasn't wearing a coat, but as we reached the far end of the garden by the kissing gate it came on to rain quite heavily. Now I had forgotten to take my cloak which Sonia had put out for me and I told Simon to run back and fetch it so that he could have something to keep him dry. And that was all there was to it, I assure you."

"Do you know what happened then?"

"Yes. I've been over it with Simon again and again. He went in at the front door. There was no one in the hall and he picked up the cloak from the chair without anyone seeing him, and he put it on. And then—then he left."

"By the front door?"

"No. No, that's the suspicious thing—at least unless

you know Simon it is. You see, lately, because of all the financial worry and so on that he's been through, he's taken to drinking—not heavily perhaps but more than's good for him. The dining-room door was open and there was a decanter of brandy on the sideboard. He went in and helped himself to a drink. And then he saw out of the corner of his eye Bancroft appearing through the baize door at the far end of the hall—he'd left the dining-room door open, you see—and as he didn't want to be caught in the act of swilling the brandy he slipped out of the french window."

"And overtook you again?"

"Yes, he was only gone a few minutes—not that I suppose that matters."

"No. He had the opportunity—that is what counts."

She caught his arm, bringing them both to a halt.

"Mr. Breeze, what do you really think?"

"I'm not sure." They moved on a step or two. "There's something I haven't got my finger on. A question of timing which eludes me. By the way, did you leave the light on in the cottage?"

They had reached the point on the cliff where a precipitous path led down to the cottage; light poured out of the lower window.

"No, I'm sure I didn't. And Nanna—my old nurse who lives with me, you know—is out."

"Perhaps your cousin is back?"

Already Rose was running down the path; she slipped and finished the course sliding on back and heels. She picked herself up at once and ran in by the front door. Benedict reached the hall in time to hear her exclamation of surprise. She stood in the doorway of her sitting-room.

"I've been burgled!" she cried.

She took a step forward. Benedict joined her. The room was in confusion. The drawers of the desk were pulled out and papers were littered on the floor.

"Has anything gone?" he asked.

"I can't see that it has—there isn't much to take."

"What about the other rooms?"

Benedict went into the kitchen. Everything seemed in order here. Rose called from upstairs and he went up to her bedroom. The drawers of the bow-fronted dressing-table had been pulled out as if someone had looked through them quickly without stopping to shut them. On the mantelpiece stood two handsome silver candlesticks.

"Well, they weren't interested in silver, apparently," Benedict said. "Have you any jewellery or other valuables?"

"Nothing at all—an old musquash fur coat—oh, and the brooch Herbert left me."

"Valuable?"

"No, I don't think so. A pink topaz—semi-precious, you know. Anyway, that's not gone. I'm wearing it."

She unbuttoned her coat and showed the red stone gleaming on her black dress. Benedict looked at it attentively.

"It's very unusual," he said, "that fiery colour. I wonder what they were after."

"We may have disturbed them," Rose said. "They could have got away by the other gate as we came down the cliff path."

"We'd better let the police know," Benedict said.

"The police? Oh yes. If only I knew what had happened to Simon."

"If he had been arrested he would have let you know, you can be sure of that."

"Yes, that's why I'm worried. I mean, in case he's done something—something silly."

They went downstairs. Benedict rang the Pormouth police station and reported the burglarious entry into the cottage. He tried to find out about Simon but the sergeant

in charge professed no knowledge of his whereabouts. Benedict put down the receiver; he was a little apprehensive of the reticence with which the sergeant had spoken.

"What do we do now?" Rose said.

"Officially we should wait for the police. But in fact I think we will go to the Court."

"Why? He's not there."

"Because there is something I want to find out."

"What?"

"A matter of timing. Possibly Sonia Malynson can help me."

As they walked to the Court, Benedict gave Rose the details of his visit to Henriette. They entered the garden through the kissing gate. The shuttered windows of the house looked down at them blankly. They went in by the front door. The hall seemed full of light and people. The furniture had been pushed back against the walls; a small girl with a basket of imitation irises slung over her shoulder and a plate of peaches precariously held in one hand was in the middle of the floor. The rehearsal was apparently in full swing; Miss Stokes was hovering in the background ready to push forward other little girls disguised by garlands and posies as months of the year. Lady Malynson was standing a little on one side with a prompt copy in her hand.

"Have done with thunder and fire," she mouthed, and at the same time made a gesture with her hand, waving Rose and Benedict to chairs against the wall. As they moved in that direction a sound of hammering rose from the other end of the hall. July had recalled her part and in a voice pitched on one high note recited:

"Have done with thunder and fire,
O sky with the rainbow crest,
O earth, have done with desire. . . "

But now a thundering battery of blows drowned the girl's words. The sound came from the cellar door. Benedict crossed swiftly to it. He drew back the bolt. Simon Malynson came swaying out into the hall. "Some fool bolted that door," he said in a thick voice.

Benedict took his arm. "There's a rehearsal going on. Let's go into the library."

"A rehearsal, did you say? Let's all join in."

He shook off Benedict's hand and swayed across the hall to the little months, who broke in confusion. But July held her place in the middle of the floor.

"O earth, have done with desire
Drink, and drink deep and rest."

"What a damned good idea!" Simon cried.

"Simon, be quiet," Rose said in an urgent whisper.

"'Lo, Rose. I've been drowning my sorrows. Felt I needed something after I'd finished with the police——"

"Silence!" Sonia hissed at him.

"Drink, and drink deep and rest," July repeated.

And the startled Miss Stokes gave a violent push to little August, who, encased in yellow satin, tottered forward, clutching a sheaf of corn.

"Hail, brother August, flushed and warm," July piped, lifting an arm in greeting and upsetting the peaches.

A bell pealed through the house. Then without waiting for an answer the callers walked into the hall. They were Inspector Sussex and Sergeant Berry.

"And scatheless from my storm," July went on as the peaches rolled to the Inspector's feet.

"'Lo, Inspector—not me again?" Simon said.

"I should like you to come with me to the Pormouth police station, sir, to answer a few more inquiries."

"And scatheless from thy storm," Simon repeated with a

slight amendment of text. "My dear fellow, of course I'll come. I love the whole world. D'ye know what to do if you haven't a corkscrew handy? Knock the necks off the bottles——"

And he collapsed into the firm grasp of the two officers.

"Inspector, my cousin is not in a fit state to make any statement," Rose said, stepping forward with an air of authority.

"I quite understand that," the Inspector said.

"Nonsense, Rose, my mind's as clear as a bell. As a matter o' fact, by the time I'd got to the third bottle—oh, wonderful stuff that brandy—I'd solved the whole thing. D'ye go to the theatre much, Inspector?"

"I can't say I do, sir."

"Pity, that. Make a point of seeing Geda Habler—no, no, hang it, I mean Hedda Gabler. Puts your case in a nutshell. Great stuff, Ibsen."

The front door closed behind them. Rose took a step forward as if to follow them and then stopped.

"I must apologize for such a disgraceful scene," Lady Malynson said to the astonished Miss Stokes.

Rose turned round. Her face was white with anger.

"Come into your sitting-room, Sonia. I must speak to you."

She spoke with such authority that Sonia obeyed her. Miss Stokes began to collect the children together. The rehearsal was clearly at an end. Benedict followed the two women into the sitting-room.

"A disgraceful scene," Sonia was repeating. "In front of the children, too."

"As if they weren't quite used to a little drunkenness now and then," Rose said. "No, it's time we dropped pretences and got down to the naked facts."

"That's where we have got to," Sonia said gently. "And

you don't seem to find them palatable. Of course I sympathize with you. Even now I find it difficult to believe that Simon could really . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished.

"Really what?" Rose said.

"Poison Herbert, then, if you insist."

"Simon is not the only one with a motive."

"You are surely not accusing Bancroft?"

"No, I'm not accusing Bancroft. After all, Sonia, you are a very jealous woman."

"What are you talking about?"

"The knowledge that Herbert should care for another woman would be quite insupportable to you."

"Really, Rose, have you quite taken leave of your senses? You know that Herbert and I were utterly devoted——"

"You were probably under that illusion until a couple of months ago when you surprised him at the Opera with Henriette."

Sonia gave a gasp and her face seemed quite haggard.

"How do you know that?"

"That doesn't matter. It's true, isn't it? You insisted on his breaking off all connection with her. But on the night he died she came to visit him, believing you to be away from home. You went out into the hall while he was talking to her at the door. Perhaps you overheard what they said—at any rate your suspicions were aroused—you believed they were still in touch with each other and in a fury of jealousy you poisoned him."

"It's a lie!" Sonia shrieked. "An utter and abominable lie! Oh, I know you've always hated me. You've always resented my love for Herbert and his for me. You wanted him all to yourself—you never wanted him to marry. But even so you must surely see that your accusation is utterly baseless. Apart from anything else, I never had any opportunity of putting poison in his food."

"Naturally you took some trouble over an alibi. Bancroft was helpful. He could probably tell us something about it."

"Bancroft?"

"Yes. I wondered why all of a sudden when the police inquiry started you should have changed your mind about the Bancrofts, why they should be staying on, why you were suddenly going to give them the four hundred pounds which Herbert had left Bancroft under the terms of the second will he made—and which you, by the way, out of jealousy of Simon, destroyed."

"I deny it! I deny it! Mr. Breeze, are you standing there and allowing me to be insulted by such slanderous, such cruel, accusations?"

The gong sounded in the hall.

"Oh, dinner," Sonia said. "As if we could eat."

"It's only the first gong——" Rose began.

"The first gong, my dear Rose?" Sonia said with a little tinkling laugh as if trying to break away from the mood of intensity which had enveloped them. "You are behind the times."

"Oh yes, of course. I'd forgotten since Herbert died you've only had one gong."

"One gong," Benedict repeated. "Good heavens, why didn't I think of that before?"

He crossed to the door.

"Bancroft," he called.

"Sir." Bancroft turned from the gong.

"Would you come in here a moment?"

Bancroft came in and stood by the door, watching the company with uncertain, shifting gaze.

"Yes, that's very sensible," Rose said. "Now we can get down to things. Bancroft, I want you to tell me——"

"Mr. Breeze, really, I protest," Sonia said. "Will you allow my servants to be questioned?"

"Believe me, Lady Malynson, it may save a great deal of trouble in the end," Benedict said.

"Then you are against me, too," she cried. "You have betrayed my trust."

"No. On the contrary, I am only interested in collecting the facts. May I suggest that you allow me to continue this inquiry without heat or emotion—simply with the object of arriving at the truth."

"Very well," Sonia said.

"I entirely agree," Rose said.

"Bancroft," Benedict went on, "I would like you to tell me exactly what took place on the evening of Sir Herbert's death at the point when you came into the hall to serve dinner."

"Well, I've told you once," Bancroft said truculently. "And if you ask me, I'm sick of all this inquiry—but if her ladyship insists then I'll tell you all over again. I opened the baize door and as I fastened it back, so that I could get through with the tray, I saw Miss Rose standing by the sideboard in the dining-room——"

"Bancroft, you never told me that," Sonia cried.

"Well, there was no call to——"

"In fact, it was Mr. Simon Malynson you saw. He had just come back to fetch Miss Rose's cloak to protect him against the rain."

"Simon!" Sonia cried. "What did I say? Didn't I tell you he might have come back?"

"Now what was Lady Malynson doing at this moment?" Benedict went on.

"She was talking to the vicar at the front door," Bancroft replied.

"And what did you do?"

"I took the dinner-tray through into the dining-room. There was no sign of anyone. Whoever it was had gone out through the window, I reckon. And then I stepped back into the hall and sounded the gong."

"And what happened then?"

"Well, the vicar left at once and then Sir Herbert came out of his study and he and her ladyship went in to dinner."

"There you are!" Sonia said.

"You and the vicar were standing in the outer hall the whole time?" Benedict persisted.

"Yes. He wouldn't come in."

"Exactly," Benedict said. "Then how do you account for the fact that when Simon came in by the front door to fetch his cousin's cloak, he found the hall empty?"

"It's not true. You've just heard what Bancroft said. And the vicar will tell you that he left when he heard the gong——"

"Certainly, but I fancy it was the first, not the second, gong he heard."

"My goodness, why didn't I think of that before?" Rose said. "No wonder you stopped sounding the two gongs."

"You see, the vicar was in a hurry to get back to a broadcast at eight entitled 'Does Religion Make Sense?' He appears to have got back just as the programme was starting. Now he could hardly have done that had he left here on the stroke of eight."

"What are you saying?" Sonia cried.

"That you were, in fact, alone after the vicar left you at about five to eight—but later by mutual consent you and Bancroft agreed to cover up the gap."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sonia said. "What does time mean to me? The events of that awful evening all seemed telescoped into one endless timeless nightmare. I can't be expected to account for every minute of my time."

"The police will expect that," Rose said.

"Yes, and they will expect to know what Simon was doing standing by the dining-room sideboard and then sneaking out like a thief by the french window. But why do

I say a thief? Thieves are often men of decent instincts—not full of cruel murderous thoughts against the man who befriended them——"

"Shall I serve dinner, my lady?" Bancroft intervened.

Sonia, who had made a dramatic gesture with her hands, looked a little deflated. "We can none of us eat," she said.

"Indeed we can," Benedict said. "And must. A little wine and food will do us all a power of good, and restore a little sanity to the situation. Bring in the dinner, Bancroft. Let me take you ladies into the dining-room for a drink."

"There's sherry here," Sonia said.

"Sherry, no, I think not. For haemorrhage and emotional shock only brandy is really any good."

He walked to the door and opened it. The ladies passed out in front of him. He turned off the light. Then he saw that the reading-lamp on the desk was still burning; he crossed to the desk and felt for the switch. His eye fell for an instant on the typescript which lay on the open flap of the desk. 'The Monastic Way of Life. An Historical Survey by Sonia and Herbert Malynson'. Then he turned off the switch and, guiding himself by the dim light from the hall, left the room.

In the dining-room he found the ladies at opposite ends of the table. A frozen silence held them in a sort of hostile and distant touch. Benedict splashed the brandy into the glasses. Rose and Sonia sipped their brandy in silence. Benedict tossed down half a glassful of the liquid; instantly his brain was cleared, but still the pattern refused to fall into shape. Bancroft came in with the soup and set the bowls before them. Benedict gave himself up to agreeable sensations. He would put off thinking until afterwards. "Hedda Gabler, the whole case in a nutshell. Fine stuff, Ibsen." Simon's words came back to him inconsequentially. They floated again out of his mind; he half-closed his eyes and circles of gold flecked with black seemed to press upon his

lids. And then unexpectedly the last bit of the pattern fell into place. He set down his soup spoon, made some excuse to the ladies and left the room.

He went straight to Sonia Malynson's sitting-room. He switched on the light. Everything was exactly as he had left it. He turned off the light and made his way by the light from the dying embers of the fire over to the sofa which stood across the window. He dropped down on the floor behind the sofa. He stretched out his legs and put his back against the window-seat; he might have a long time to wait and it was as well to make himself comfortable. He waited for a few minutes and then he thought he heard the sound of the door opening; someone had come into the room without turning on the light. He peered over the back of the sofa; from the faint firelight he could just make out the tall figure of Rose Malynson. She was by the sofa now.

"Hist," he said.

She gave a violent start.

"Oh, you," she said.

"Yes. What are you doing here?"

"I've also read my Ibsen."

He caught her hands and pulled her down beside him; from a long way off in the house he thought he heard the faint sound of movement.

"Keep still—not a sound," he whispered.

They waited for what seemed a long time. He began to think he was mistaken. Then a slight noise made him peer towards the door. He could see an amber ray of light as it opened, then it shut again at once. He could see a moving pink round glow; someone had come into the room and was guiding their footsteps by a torch over which fingers were held to subdue the light. Then the point of light passed out of his line of vision; he could hear faint movements by the desk; the rustle of paper and then the sensation of someone passing close to the sofa. He had dropped down behind the

back; but now he looked up again. A figure had passed into the narrow radius of the firelight. Now he could see a woman crouching down by the fireplace. There was a sudden rending tear and the flames shot up from the dying embers.

Rose gave a sharp intake of breath and started to get up. At the same moment the light was switched on. Sonia Malynson stood in the doorway. Then she gave a cry of horror and rushed towards the fireplace. Gladys Hamshire sprang to her feet brandishing the poker with which she had been grinding a wedge of papers into the fire.

"Oh, the manuscript!" Sonia cried.

"Keep away!" Gladys yelled.

Benedict sprang forward in time to seize the poker as it was about to descend on Sonia's head. Leaving it in his hand, Gladys threw herself forward and she and Sonia fell in a furious struggle on the hearthrug. Over their prostrate bodies Benedict bent forward and with the poker pulled out the burning typescript. Rose stepped into the hearth and extinguished the flames with her foot. An astringent smell rose from the still smouldering pages.

Sonia, breaking free from Gladys, leapt to her feet and, seizing a vase of chrysanthemums from the mantelpiece, emptied the water over the smouldering paper. Gladys made a frantic effort to seize the manuscript but Benedict caught her in his arms; she struggled with all the strength of the possessed; a quick ju-jutsu movement and he had her lying back on the sofa. He looked down with compassion on her wild ravaged face; she was like some animal struggling to free herself, then with a last hopeless effort she drove her teeth into his bared wrist. With a sharp exclamation he withdrew his arm, but she lay now flaccid and exhausted on the sofa, weeping into the cushions.

"Oh, the typescript! It's ruined, ruined!" Sonia cried.

"Well, I don't suppose the water helped it," Rose remarked.

"All my work ruined," Sonia went on, bending down to pick up the remains, "ruined in one moment of time."

"Your work!" Gladys cried, looking up from the cushions. "My work, you mean. And I am glad—glad that nothing should survive us, that all the hours of time I spent on it should drop into utter annihilation. Oh, you evil woman, you killed him!"

"Gladys, you don't know what you're saying," Sonia cried.

"You killed him. You drove me to it," Gladys went on, the words bursting from her like a long-dammed-up torrent. "O God, forgive me. Oh, why do I say that when I don't believe in God? But it wasn't my fault. It was your fault. You had everything already, but you had to take from me the one thing I had—the writing I shared with him. And not content with that to throw me out like some unwanted tool when I'd served my purpose—to filch for yourself all the triumph of having written the book. In the sight of God you're more evil than I am. But why do I keep on about God? He doesn't exist, so He can't have anything to do with it. Just your guilt and my guilt, and yours is far greater than mine. Oh, you deserved to die. The devil must know how to look after his own——"

"Gladys, be careful," Rose said. "Think what you're saying."

"Oh, I don't mind who hears me. Let the truth for once blast this house to pieces. What does it matter what happens to me? Do you think I want to live, tied to that secret like a corpse all my life? All right, I killed him. I poisoned him—the only man I've ever loved. And you should have died, too. Oh, when I saw him lying there. And you alive. But at least you shan't have that book——" And springing up she snatched the book from Sonia's hands and, knocking over the small table which stood in her way, made straight for the door.

"There, now, let me have it," a voice said, and Inspector Sussex stepped from the shadow of the doorway. Astonished, she let him take the book from her. "Over to you," he said, handing it to Sergeant Berry, who was behind him. And then he gently led Gladys Hamshire out of the room. The sergeant stood looking down at the charred, sodden mass of paper.

"And to think someone was murdered for this," he said.

"I wonder if there was anything we could have done to have helped her, to have prevented this from ever happening," Rose was saying.

It was nearly two hours later. Benedict had taken Rose back to the cottage. They had found Simon, safely released from the police station, waiting for them. The ordeal had sobered him. He had set to work to make coffee and sandwiches and had coaxed Rose to partake when she had lain back on the sofa, declaring herself too exhausted to do anything but smoke.

"I suppose we're all in a way responsible for each other's sins," Simon said. "What a cheering thought! But at least you haven't anything to reproach yourself with, Rose; you were always kind to her."

"You mean I asked her to tea when I couldn't put it off any longer," Rose said. "And lent her a few books. That was the extent of my kindness. The plain fact is that we none of us love enough." She was silent a moment, and then she added, "When did you first suspect, Mr. Breeze?"

"I was regrettably slow in the uptake," Benedict replied. "I could see, of course, that she was in a very emotional and tense state, but that, after all, might have been due to shock and grief—not to guilt. I think Henriette gave me my first real pointer when she said Sonia had not been after all the indispensable helpmate on the book, and that Sir Herbert had owed so much to Gladys. And then, of course, the

apparent rifling of your room here. That puzzled me. Though it didn't occur to me at once that it was Gladys after the typescript."

"But why come all the way down here after it?"

"Because she was going in the morning and she couldn't know you were going to bring the typescript back again—that, in fact, you had already done so. She had, of course, already taken the precaution of destroying the copy. Sonia, if you remember, couldn't find it, and had to ask you to return the original."

"And then?"

"And then it was your cousin's words about Hedda Gabler. Not an exact parallel, of course. In the play as far as I remember Hedda burns the manuscript which her dead lover had been inspired by her rival to write. And then all at once the motive was quite clear to me. Gladys had suddenly found herself dismissed at the very moment when the book she had sweated over, into which all her hard-earned knowledge, her very real intelligence, had gone, for which, in fact, she was really responsible, was finished—she was to be dismissed so that Sonia could take over the book and proclaim herself the co-author. In a fury of jealousy and frustration she decided to poison them both. The only thing which had puzzled me was the opportunity. But once I had uncovered Sonia's little game with the time, it was quite easy. Percy was outside the corridor. He said that Miss Hamshire did not come out of the door. I had ruled out the possibility of the window. Now he said he left when he heard the gong go, but of course it was the first, not the second, gong he heard. There were just a few minutes in hand before dinner. All Gladys had to do was to slip downstairs with the poison—we know she had some at hand in her room, taken for the innocent purpose of hat dye—the vicar had gone; Sonia was probably in her room, certainly not in the hall any more. You, Simon, had not yet come in

at the front door on your return visit to the house. Bancroft was in the kitchen. Sir Herbert in his study. All she had to do was to walk into the dining-room and sprinkle the arsenic into the sugar basin and go up to her room again. Of course she meant to kill them both, but she didn't know that Sonia had started a diet and wouldn't touch the sugar. The only other thing which remained for her to do was to remove the traces of the poison. I think she described that when she told of her descent in the night—only substituting Sonia for herself."

"Did she burn the will then, too?"

"No. I am inclined to think that Sonia did that, though probably not in the circumstances that Gladys described. She didn't do the job quite thoroughly enough and Gladys afterwards retrieved two of the charred fragments."

"But why did Sonia take all that trouble to fake the time?" Rose said.

"As if anyone ever knew Sonia's motives for doing anything," Simon said. "But largely, I suspect in order to safeguard her own position—which was none too healthy, after all—and to fix the crime on me."

"Yes," Benedict agreed, "I think that once she had admitted to herself that Sir Herbert had died an unnatural death, she then leapt to the certain conclusion that you had killed him."

"And determined to help justice on its course, she faked that entry in the diary. What a strange woman! A corkscrew is straight by comparison. And talking of corkscrews——"

"No," Rose said firmly.

"No, of course, I'd forgotten," Simon said. "The water-wagon for me."

"And that wretched Gladys," Rose said. "I can't get her out of my mind."

"With luck she'll hang and get it all over," Simon said. "But I suppose you wouldn't admit that, Breeze. With you there's always the hereafter to take into account."

"Certainly."

"A sobering thought if you really believe in it."

"Sometimes I do," Rose said. "Oh, what ought we to do about Gladys?"

"Would you like to leave it to me?" Benedict said.

"I should be so grateful. And now what do we do next?"

"Now you're going straight to bed," Simon said, putting his arm round her. "And then when you've had a lot of sleep, darling, we'll have a talk about things." He glanced at Benedict. "I haven't forgotten that vow I made."

"Oh, I am very glad. My felicitations to you both."

"Oh, are we engaged?" Rose said. "It's nice to know."

THE END

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